

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK

DECEMBER 2004

The Eleven O'Clock Number

Just the ticket to get
back the limelight

By ROBERT S.
LEVINSON

Plus...

Kathy Lynn Emerson
Russel D. McLean
Ann Woodward

www.TheMysteryPlace.com



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

6 Issues, Just \$10.97!

Subscribe today and get 6 intriguing mystery magazines delivered to your door at half-off the regular newsstand price!



Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine leads the genre in critical acclaim with more than 50 major awards and nominations just since 1990!

Every issue delivers suspenseful stories from the honor roll of mystery and crime fiction's great writers PLUS mystery limericks, poems and cartoons, book reviews, and an occasional mystery crossword!

Order Today and Save 50%!

To charge your order to MC or Visa, call

TOLL-FREE 1-800-220-7443

(9am-5pm EST) Orders only, please!

BY MAIL



**Ellery Queen, Suite S, 6 Prowitt St.
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220**

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$5 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. *We publish double issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your subscription. Offer expires 12/31/05.

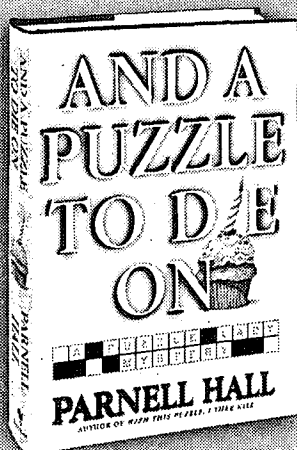
84C-NZQDLL

Can you fill in the blanks?*

1				4						10			
---	--	--	--	---	--	--	--	--	--	----	--	--	--

Across

1. Common article
4. Baffle, confuse.
10. Jane Grey was one.



New in hardcover



Now in paperback

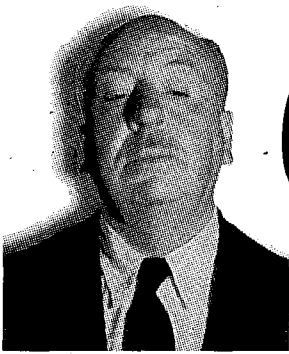
“A joy for lovers of both crosswords
and frothy crime detection.”

—Chicago Sun-Times

*The clues lead to **THE PUZZLE LADY**, the irresistible
mystery series by Parnell Hall that combines two of your
favorite kinds of brain-teasing entertainment!



Wherever books are sold • Visit the author at www.parnellhall.com



C CONTENTS

December 2004

Cover by Laura Freeman

FICTION

- 4 THE BURDEN OF PITY by Ann Woodward
- 15 DUDMAN'S WORD by Russel D. McLean
- 32 THAT THING by Douglas Grant Johnson
- 63 THE ELEVEN O'CLOCK NUMBER
by Robert S. Levinson
- 76 THE CURSE OF THE FIGURE FLINGER
by Kathy Lynn Emerson
- 96 THE OPEN TILL by David Braly
- 102 THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH AND TIME
by S. L. Franklin

MYSTERY CLASSIC

- 127 LAURA SILVER BELL by J. S. LeFanu

DEPARTMENTS

- 3 EDITOR'S NOTES
- 14 BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY
Sleuth of Baker Street, Toronto, Ontario
- 30 MYSTERIOUS CIPHER by Willie Rose
- 31 MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH
- 74 CONVERSATION with Robert S. Levinson
- 94 BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn
- 101 UNSOLVED by Robert V. Kesling
- 126 SOLUTION to the November Dying Words
- 139 THE STORY THAT WON
- 140 INDEX

Indicia on page 143

EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

CHARMS AND SATISFACTIONS FOR READERS OF SHORT STORIES

I have always felt that, in their immediacy and focus, short stories provide a visceral experience that longer forms of fiction may not. I have been reminded of this lately by the letters we have received in response to our invitation to readers to nominate their favorite stories in anticipation of our upcoming 50th anniversary. The response has been phenomenal; letters have poured in naming stories published from all eras of AHMM's history. But I have been particularly struck by the number of letters that start with the words, "I can't remember the title of the story, but . . ." These correspondents invariably go on to describe in detail a story that was published, often enough, decades ago—and yet from their description, it's clear that the story still remains fresh and vivid in their minds.

The best short stories offer a concentrated, emotional punch that lingers in the mind for years and even decades. And the December issue features eight stories that I hope will offer readers that same experience. Their historical sweep ranges from the ancient Japan of Ann Woodward's "The Burden of Pity," to the Elizabethan England of Kathy Lynn Emerson's "The Curse of the Figure Flinger," to the American Depression of Douglas Grant Johnson's "That Thing." Vividly drawn contemporary settings include the Dundee, Scotland, of Russel D. McLean's private-eye story, "Dudman's Word," and the glamorous but dangerous Hollywood of Robert S. Levinson's "The Eleven O'Clock Number." This month's issue also features a conversation with Levinson, a profile of Toronto's premier mystery bookstore, Sleuth of Baker Street (in honor of this year's Bouchercon setting), and more stories of crime and intrigue.

Keep those letters coming, and someday one of these stories may linger in your mind as well.

THE BURDEN OF PITY

ANN WOODWARD

It was simply too hot to sleep. The dying summer had distilled a dense mass of water-laden air, undisturbed by storms or winds, into the great bowl among mountains in which the city spread. The Lady Aoi had moved from the clinging pads of her bed, and she sat on the bare floor beside a lowered blind that gave her privacy. Across the adjacent verandah, the garden of the princess's house was not quiet.

There had been a banquet at the palace, and, as usual, the prince had returned to the house of his principal wife with a group of friends, where their drinking had continued. By twos and threes the men were leaving, shouting farewells to each other, stumbling toward their horses, their carriages, their attendants, doubling back for one last boast of their own incapacity as evidence of the quality and bounty of the host's wine.

Aoi had heard it all many times. She only hoped to be let alone and not pestered with the slurred poetic pleas of a casual visitor. Drifting along the verandahs of the mansions of friends was customary. Men looking for company—and often that was all they wanted, a sympathetic conversation that displayed their sensibilities and taste, that yielded acknowledgment of their refinements, that allowed them to relax from the constant tension of competition prevailing among them—would spy the edge of a silk sleeve or hem that might slip under a blind and they would stop to investigate, with varying degrees of subtlety and usually speaking highflown language. Romance was sometimes the result of these conversations, but it was often forced and superficial. Marriage was signaled by three consecutive nights together, a situation supposedly unsuspected by the family but celebrated with



Tim Foley

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

special rice cakes when the man stayed on into the daylight and admitted his intentions. Women made themselves evident by subtle signs of their presence, but even if they wanted solitude; the lowered blind gave them away and the men knew there was someone in the space behind. Few could resist stopping.

As the voices outside receded, Aoi stood and moved to the cords that would raise the blind a little to allow some circulation of air. "Ah," said a voice outside, and she dropped the blind with a clatter.

"Are you there, lady?"

Not recognizing the voice, Aoi was silent. She began a movement toward the back of the room, but an edge of her gown had slipped into view and the man had hold of it. If she were to move farther, her clothes would remain behind. She wore only the sheerest of gauze robes. She was alone because her maid O-Hana had gone to the kitchen yard where there was a young man she liked, and she was in no mood, in such heat, for romantic dallying and play of poetry.

"Do not detain me," she said in a quiet voice.

The man, far from releasing the gauze, settled on the boards of the verandah outside the blind, and it began, the old ritual of courtship. But not in the usual way.

"How strange," he said. "I have no idea who you are and you have spoken only one short sentence. Yet I feel such an affinity here. You are a woman of judgment and balance."

Aoi did not answer but she slid closer to the blind and gathered her collars and her skirts into almost their proper alignment. He could see her form; she knew that. Thin strips of reed do not completely hide what is close to them on the other side. She would be perceived as a darker shadow in the general darkness. She was not coy. This man had described what she considered her true qualities, and she wondered what he would say next.

"So hot!" he said.

Banal in the extreme, she thought, but she answered, "Hmm."

"I thought that heat could not touch me," he said.

"And why is that?" Aoi could not help her interest.

"Because there is such winter in my heart."

"Ah." Poetry after all. He is to speak of hearts like all the rest. "I do not know much of winter," she said, "but . . ."

"But you would welcome some of it now." This man was not given to poetry, would not make pretty phrases like most of those who lived in her lavish world. He said plainly what he meant.

By now Aoi was convinced that she did not know him. Among the prince's friends there were none who had this frank and

unmodulated voice with its very slight burr of the country in it. Her own attraction to the voice alarmed her. Ah, Aoi, she said to herself. Has life been so dull these hot weeks that you are sitting listening to a stranger?

The summer had been unbearable from the beginning, with tearing storms, fires lit by lightning, trees ripped out by the roots in bursts of wind. The often ferocious priests of the mountain temples had rampaged into the city with their staves of wood, cracking walls and heads, breaking down gates, setting on those who had allowed new regulations that limited their temples' acquisition of fields and woodlands. And to make it all worse, there had recently been cases of the sickness of rashes. Children sniffled and then bloomed with red spots that eventually covered them entirely. They burned with fever and many died.

So it was that the air was tinged with smoke, yellow at dusk, unmoved in the still heat. Called to this house and that house because of her reputation as a person who understood medicines, Aoi had dosed and cooled and soothed to no effect and watched many of her patients, not all of them children, die.

What she felt from all this came out now. "I would not wish for winter but for a spirit being. The Pure Land of our Buddhist yearnings attracts me as never before. This burden of flesh . . ." As was the custom among sensitive people, she did not complete her thought, trusting that it would be understood.

"Yes, so many physical unpleasantnesses to be accepted by high-minded people. But your spirit must be benevolent indeed, if you could trust it to survive and do good in the world. I—" He stopped as if the breath for words had been snatched away.

"It is from hurt that your heart is cold?" Aoi said.

"There was a child," he answered.

When he was young, he said—very young—he had been sent into the far northeast where there was always trouble between the settlers and the native people. He was supposed to be a soldier, a rider, skilled with the sword, the javelin. But his commander would not rely on violence, and his men's skills, obtained after so much practice, were not tested. There were conferences, they rode among the villages, sorting out loud claims, disputes, fishing rights. To this man, this commander, the villagers were not strange, misshapen gobblers in a language no normal person could comprehend. He was a man of sympathy, strong enough to allow it to rule him. The soldiers thought him weak and some of them reported him to the capital as ineffective. He was demoted and transferred. A replacement arrived. "His name was— But I cannot say it."

The nameless new commander took over. He drilled them, he reminded them how far from home they all were, threatened on every side by savages, people who stank of fish and the rot of the rice fields, in a country of snow.

"Yes, it was cold there, even in summer. But I had grown to like the snow, so pure and mounded, the stiff bristles of the harvested fields with their rime of frost, the stones that shattered from the cold of hard dawns. Our lungs swelled and stretched in that air. When we were warm, we were grateful. When we were cold, we tightened and became strong."

He paused. She too could see—the sky was lightening now—an outline, and he turned his head away toward the garden. His voice roughened. "And then we went after them."

"Went after . . . ?"

"This man's weapon was fire. We burned the villages. And there was a child . . ."

In Aoi's mind rang the clangs and cries of battle. She was not unfamiliar with such sounds, she knew the horror of true terror, true loss. But to cause those sounds . . . "Ah yes," she said.

He turned back and leaned closer. "Lady, you are a person who can listen. Forgive me. Though I don't say the words, you see the mayhem, the loss of humanity that could cause it." He stopped again. Then, "Yes, there was a child, found in the wreckage, terribly burned. My men took him home. The women screamed at them, How did they think any help could save this child, how could they have so harmed a little boy, get out of our sight. Monsters!"

They had wept, the men had wept, but none of them could stop trying. "The boy never cried, at first, his injuries were so . . ."

He pulled in a deep breath, straightened his back, dropped his head. "He survived," he said at last. "Scarred, a bit twisted, but whole. We cherished him, he had dozens of fathers, families in every hut."

Again he was silent. Aoi thought he had finished his tale. Behind him birds woke, trees loomed from the shadows.

"And do you know," he said in a voice very near shattering, "I saw that man this night. It is granted that I may kill him."

"Because of the boy who survived?"

"Yes. The boy who survived to be ridden down by a whole troop of new recruits, led to his headquarters by this man of swollen soul."

Dawn was near, but he left before Aoi could see him clearly. He thanked her simply; she was used to being thanked for lis-

tening. Her problem now was to try to prevent a killing.

At least that was her instinct: to find out the name of the threatened man and warn him, to determine who it was who had told her this tale and have him detained. She could do either of these things, but she had doubts. She shifted restlessly about from reed blind to bed to cooler floorboards. The usual dawn breezes did not come, her long hair, bound in several places with ribbons, weighed unbearably, each thread of her garment seemed to have melted in the heat just to cling to her skin.

It is a serious thing to meddle into the ordained fate of another, she thought. How can I know what is right? I am connected, through my role as attendant, to persons of influence. I can ask for the help of the Great Minister of the Right, who is the father of my princess and the most powerful man in the government. Can I find in myself pride for this? Ah! she thought, it is so hot! And she flung out her arms along the floor, turned her face from the growing light, and slept.

O-Hana woke her and brought washing water and clean towels. Aoi felt that she could barely support her throbbing head or lift her hands to engage thickened fingers in the ordinary tasks of grooming and eating. Confusion and disturbance of mind, acute physical discomfort robbed her of energy, and she could only sit limply, deliberately turned from any view of the garden as punishment for her indecision.

O-Hana, who seemed to be in a state of glowing contentment because of the young kitchen man, observed Aoi's mood and set about her duties without speaking. This, perversely, annoyed Aoi, who wanted to talk over her predicament with her sensible maid, if only she could decide that it would not be unethical to reveal the secrets of another.

She burst out angrily, "Well, I suppose all is serene in the kitchen, with only cold food to prepare these days."

"As a matter of fact, the kitchen is quite upset," O-Hana said. "That person from the market has come, and he is drunk and harassing the maids. The cook—"

"Ah," said Aoi. Here was a solution. "Send him to me." It was as if a cool wind whirled about her.

"But he—" O-Hana began.

"Throw water on him, he won't object to that, I think. Hold his head in a bucket, do what you must. I want him here at once."

The Combmaker, when he appeared, was decidedly and quite happily drenched. His ragged garments left marks along the floor as he made his usual groveling entrance, pushing himself practically

prostrate toward the curtain on a stand that concealed Aoi, lisping and servile, one eye wandering at an alarming angle from the other. Aoi regarded him wryly through a gap in the curtains.

This disreputable man always knew everything that happened in the city. Aoi supposed that it was improper for her to associate with him, but in fact he had been recommended by the prince at a time of a past problem, and he was used whenever secrecy and discretion were required. He could disguise his appearance by merely shifting his dirty and voluminous garments. He was invisible to priests, who commonly ignored the most pitiful figures in their path. He lived in a knocked-together hovel near the western market. Rioting priests had overrun a previous structure on that same spot and his wife and child had been killed in the collapse of their home. He despised priests. His nerves were no longer steady enough for the meticulous carving and filing of wooden combs. He was often drunk.

Now he rolled his head from side to side on the floor, grimacing with the ache of it. He spoke a sentence in market dialect, which Aoi did not understand. In fact, one of the reasons she was able to work with him was that he could mimic perfectly the speech of the court.

"Moht gloriioth lady," he began again. The next of his tricks was to lisp. "Thith unworthy perthon—"

"Please," said Aoi, "spare me this speech I have heard so many times. Sit up, collect yourself. I need your help."

He sucked his teeth, considering. "Well, if you are willing to give up my most humble appreciation . . ."

"And I do apologize for what they did to you in the kitchen, but my concern today is somewhat urgent, I think."

And now he drew about himself the mantle of complete composure, sitting on his knees as the most aristocratic of Aoi's acquaintances would do, tipping his head to one side in the attitude of one ready to listen. "Hmm?" he said.

She told him of her visitor in the night and of his threat. "He has found someone who destroyed his youthful ideas of a just world and he wants revenge. Do you know who either of these men could be?"

"Last night's banquet guests included a delegation from overseas. I am not sure just who of our countrymen accompanied them from the southern port, but I can find out. As could you, lady, by consulting the prince, hmm?"

"I cannot question him about his guests—the man was invited here, after all, and must be a friend. I have tried to think who

could have been serving in the northeast so long ago, but I was not here then; I was with my father in the provinces."

"You are sure it was long ago?"

"He sounded aged, though now I think of it that could have been only the cold of his heart that he spoke of, affecting his voice. It was strange. Such a brief talk and so much emotion in it."

"It was dark, he could not see you, a good situation for talking frankly. Well, I will see what I can do," and he dissolved back into his ridiculous drunken posture of subservience and pushed his way to the door. O-Hana was waiting on the other side to let him out and her scolding voice could be heard receding along the hall.

In the afternoon, Aoi received an urgent request to attend a family stricken with rashes and fever. She and O-Hana wrapped the box of medicines and were driven to a modest mansion a few blocks away. The children in that family were infants, twin boys. They shook with chills and she covered them, they writhed with fever and she gave them willow bark tea. They died and Aoi stayed on to tend their mother, who also died. The father tore off his court hat and trampled the stiff black gauze, as if destroying a world that could produce such an evil fate. He unbound his top-knot and tore his clothing; he shredded and stamped into the ground every flower in the garden and waded into the central pond as if to drown himself. But he stopped. The water was only waist deep and after standing in it without moving for a whole afternoon, he turned about, trudged to the bank and into the house to resume what was left of his life.

Exhausted by such tragedy, Aoi returned to the princess's house, which was mostly empty. Her mistress, along with the prince and many of the servants, had gone to a family temple on Mount Hiei for some mountain air. The heat persisted, mostly unrelieved by a few weak storms.

The Combmaker, when he came the next day, had abandoned all his poses and jokes. He entered simply, bowed once simply, addressed her in a simple and thoughtful manner. "Well, lady, next time give me something that is hard to do. These two, I found them right away."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. One of them was the star of the evening, the night of the banquet. The man who commanded there in the east and set so many villages afire is proud of those days. He too was young and he considers that he summoned bravery and initiative, when actually he was rash and cruel. He serves now as an advisor in one of those kingdoms on the peninsula across the water, and he had sent

out word to all his old troops to convene here and celebrate the old days."

"And the other?"

"Actually, I do not yet know—simply one of the troops he was then, I imagine, but I have not identified him, I do not know who he is today."

"Have you been able to watch the man you know?"

"Oh yes. He travels with a large group of soldiers, also his family and many servants. The soldiers and servants, though, are Japanese, recruited after he reached our shores in the south. The authorities would not allow so many foreigners into the country. They have been lent a house in the southern section of the city and there was much coming and going. It was easy to watch that group, but we could not find any spies except ourselves." The Combmaker employed many others, especially homeless children, in his observations.

"But something has happened," he went on. "They have the sickness."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Most of the men have left, gone back to the province where he landed. The maids also drifted away, they wouldn't expose themselves to nurse a bunch of foreigners, they said."

"Heartless," said Aoi.

He shrugged. "That is what happened."

"And what of the family?"

"I think they died. The owners of the house want it burned down because of such a strong pollution of death. No one has come out or gone in for three days."

Aoi could not speak except to thank him in a strangled voice and she did not bother to see what posture he took in leaving. Her throat ached and her chest shook. A human being, she thought, must weep to hear such a story. She did not weep and felt worse because of her dry eyes.

The storms came at last. Sweeping winds tore away the miasma of damp heat, cleared the skies, and freshened green in all the gardens. The princess returned. She and her husband had quarreled, as they were so sure to do whenever they lived together for more than a few days, and he had moved back into his apartments in the palace grounds. Aoi resumed her conciliatory role and soothed the princess's headaches and tensions. There were cool days, the leaves began to turn, it rained.

Then on a night of stars and singing insects, possibly the last warm night of the autumn, she sat with a light to read by. A new

tale had come to the princess, written in four books, and the ladies were passing it around.

Footsteps outside on the verandah caused her to douse the light.

"This time, lady, I have come in search of one I found by accident before, on a night of such heat that none could sleep." It was the same voice but fuller, as if a restraining tightness had been removed.

Aoi approached the blind and sat close to it, but she did not speak. What could she say to him? Did he know what had happened to his enemy? Did he believe that his own ill will had caused the man and his family to writhe with fever and die alone? Did she believe it?

"You must think," he said, "that I . . ." He could not define what it was he might have done, harboring such a strong spirit of evil. "But I felt I must tell you—I owe you some explanations."

"I know what happened. You had no hand in it."

"Ah?" he said in surprise. "You know. Do you also know that I watched and did nothing?"

"Nothing is all any of us can do."

"But—" He sat for a space in silence. "There is perhaps no evil that does not produce some good. You said that time that you would welcome existence as a spirit, free of physical concerns and uglinesses. But I think that if we were to become true Bodhisattvas we would find a burden of pity to bear. For what being, physical or spirit, can observe the world as it is without almost unbearable pity."

"Ah."

They sat without speaking. Then he said, "I must take up that burden. I have been at home settling my affairs. Tomorrow I go into the priesthood. I just wanted you to know that . . ."

She waited to hear what it was she had been able to do for him.

" . . . that your wise silences made me see myself as vengeful and unforgiving, full of an emotion so corrosive that it was about to destroy my life. It has been a strong thing to know you, lady."

"And yet you know me not at all."

"Not so, not so." 🐦

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

Sleuth of Baker Street, Toronto's premier mystery bookstore, has two reasons to celebrate this fall. Not only has the annual Bouchercon convention come to town, but the store itself is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary.

Founded in 1979 by Judy Lelkes, the store has been owned and operated by Marian Misters and J. D. Singh since 1982. "From day one Sleuth has been a mystery specialty store," notes Mr. Singh. The store stocks both new and used books, with special attention to Sherlockiana, and "our children's section is small but not unimportant," he adds.

Though the store does business with customers throughout North America, it enjoys a particularly loyal following among Torontonians. The owners and staff have worked hard to cultivate these avid readers. "They are an intelligent, open-minded group and are always willing to entertain our suggestions for new authors or books," Mr. Singh notes; "our part of the bargain is to try very hard to keep up on what's being published and be brutally honest in our recommendations."

The store has been equally diligent in cultivating local mystery writers. Peter Robinson, Eric Wright, Howard Engel, Scott Mackay, Alison Gordon, Giles Blunt, Lyn Hamilton, Maureen Jennings, Rosemary Aubert, Caroline Roe, Jeffrey Miller, John Worsley Simpson, and Sylvia Maultash Warsh "are just some of the local writers who are as much friends as colleagues," Mr. Singh says.

Asked to name a few books that give a flavor of Toronto, Mr. Singh suggests: *The Kidnapping of Rosie Dawn* by Eric Wright (as well as his Charlie Salter novels), *Except the Dying* by Maureen Jennings (Toronto of the 1890s), *Cold Comfort* by Scott Mackay, *Murder at Osgoode Hall* by Jeffrey Miller, and *Leave Me By Dying* by Rosemary Aubert.

"Toronto is one of the best cities in North America for bookstores, specialized and general," says Mr. Singh, "so the choice of books is immense. Our job is to do mysteries better than anyone else."

Bouchercon attendees interested in a busman's holiday of their own should take the Yonge Street subway line north to Davisville and transfer to the #11 bus to Bayview and Millwood; the store is located at 1600 Bayview.

SLEUTH OF BAKER STREET ♦ www.sleuthofbakerstreet.com
1600 Bayview, Toronto, Ont., Canada M4G 3B7; 416-483-3111

DUDMAN'S WORD

RUSSEL D. MCLEAN

At around seven o'clock on Friday evening, Ally Dudman was escorted out the back doors of Tayside Police Headquarters and taken to an unmarked car. He was with two police constables who were escorting him to a local hotel.

Ally Dudman was an important witness. He was a drug-dealing scumbag, but he was liable to bring down two big fish in the Dundee drug trade were he to appear as a witness in court.

He wasn't testifying out of the goodness of his heart, of course. He was testifying to save his own arse, to cut some kind of deal so that they wouldn't treat him so harshly. The police considered the deal worth their while. They'd been after the Kennedy clan for a while.

Robert Kennedy and his brother Jimmy were both in their mid fifties. They ostensibly ran a successful pub in the city center. The Flop House had been a Dundee institution for a few years and ran as a respectable business. No matter how often the police wanted to catch something going down in there, they failed every time. The Kennedys weren't stupid; they knew how to play the game. Their father had, of course, been the same way. Organized crime is a family business.

But now Ally Dudman had the smarts and the information to connect the Kennedys directly to drug shipments coming in and out of Dundee. He could link them to one of the biggest heroin trafficking scams in the country. There was no way the police were going to let this one go.

At 6:45 that evening, Ally had begun getting cold feet. Ally had been talking to D.I. George Lindsay—known informally among his colleagues as Curious George, when he was out of earshot, due to his unnaturally simian features—and had begun to say how he was worried for his life. Curious, being a stubborn bastard and hardly what you would call a "people person," told him

to shut the f— up and be thankful he was getting the deal they were giving him. Warning bells should have rung, but Curious just wanted the stunted little shite out of the building, so he handed Ally over to the police escort with barely a word.

At 7:20 one of the two escorts radioed in a garbled message. He sounded panicked, and his transmission was cut off quickly. Nearby beat officers were dispatched to investigate the transmission.

At 7:24 the two escorts were found unceremoniously crumpled on the pavement down Dudhope Street. They had moved under the light of a street lamp. One of them—the one who had radioed in—was still conscious. His head was cut and bleeding. The other guy had suffered severe head trauma and lay unconscious beside his partner.

At 7:45 the escort car was found, abandoned, dumped in an alley with the keys still in the ignition.

At 8:03 D.I. Sandy Griggs walked out of a meeting with Curious George and called me from his mobile.

"Sam," he said when I answered. "How're you doing?" He was trying to keep his voice light and cheery.

"I'm fine," I said. I put my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and mouthed Sandy's name across the table. Ros smiled at me and nodded her head. I knew I'd have to make it a quick call.

"What's up?"

"Ally Dudman."

"Aye?"

"You know him?"

"We met a few times."

"He was in police custody," said Sandy.

"Look," I said. "Is this important? Because, you know, me and Ros, we're trying to have a nice wee intimate dinner and it's a bit hard when . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Sandy, cutting me off abruptly. "But, yeah, this is important."

I apologized to Ros and took the call outside the restaurant. I watched her through the window but she refused to look at me and ate her dinner slowly, with a deliberation that left me in no doubt I'd be in the doghouse when we got home.

Sandy explained to me about Ally and his escape from police custody. "He's our best shot at taking these bastards down," he said. "And now he's gone and pissed off."

"What can I do about it?"

"People hire your services to locate missing loved ones, right? Ally isn't exactly a loved one, but he's pretty damn important to me and to a lot of other people."

I sighed deeply. I'd promised Ros that this would be a special night. I'd been busy lately with case after case, and not to put too fine a point on it, she'd been getting more than a little narked with me.

"Can you not just find him yourself?"

"You know as well I do that the Kennedys are gonnae be looking for him," said Sandy. "And when they find him, we're going to find him dead and dumped in some council wheely bin. Let's face facts here, the bureaucracy of Tayside Constabulary is going to tie up our search for some time. We're not going to get to him first."

"So you bring in an outside contractor?"

"If you want to look at it that way."

"Who's my client? Tayside Constabulary or Sandy Griggs?"

I looked at the window once more. Inside, Ros looked away from me.

I waited for an answer.

"I know your rates, Sam. This is for me. Because, let's face facts here, pal, you're not exactly Mr. Popular with the local fuzz. I can't see the chief giving up part of this quarter's budget for your services."

It was cold outside and as I talked on the phone, I could see my breath in the air. "Fine," I said. "But don't you expect a bloody discount for this!"

He didn't laugh. "I'll meet you at the Phoenix in a half hour," he said and hung up.

I put the phone away and went back inside. I took my seat across from Ros. She looked at her plate. "What is it?"

"Sandy."

"Every time," she said. "Every damn time!"

"I wish I had a nine-to-five job," I said. "Sometimes, I really do."

She looked up, finally, and smiled. "But then you wouldn't be happy, babe," she said. And even though she was smiling, her brown eyes were tinged with a distant sadness.

Sandy was tucked in a corner booth at the Phoenix, smoking a cigarette. He had two pints all ready by the time I walked in. He'd already started drinking. His face was serious, his forehead crinkled slightly.

"Hey," I said, grabbing the seat across from him. I took the pint he'd got me and sipped at it. "What kind of time frame are we talking about?"

"As soon as possible," said Sandy. "Odds are the Kennedys'll be looking for him already. They've got contacts on the force. It's

common knowledge. Either that or they've developed some psychic voodoo mystical powers. Whatever, they seem to know everything that we do. They second-guess us, clean out their crap before we can come down on them. They'll know about Dudman and they'll know he's missing."

I sighed. "So where do I start?"

Sandy reached inside the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. He passed it over. I unfolded it.

"That's Dudman's mother's address and number," Sandy said. "Also the pubs where he tends to drink. I doubt he'll be around, but maybe someone'll know where to look. Also you have his ex-wife there as well."

"How amicable was the divorce?"

"So-so," said Sandy. "As far as these things go, anyhow." He took a deep drink of his pint. When he laid it back down on the table, he punctuated the move with a loud sigh. "Says she hasn't talked to him since the divorce."

"Any children?"

"None."

"You gave me his mother's address. What about his father?"

"Dead. Buried up at Balgay Cemetery."

"And known associates I'm going to guess are covered by crooked wee wankers like the Kennedys?"

"Closest he has to a family, I imagine."

"So he's got nowhere to go?"

"Probably not."

"And assuming he doesn't run back to the forgiving arms of Bobby and Jimmy?"

"They're going to be looking the same places we are."

"But they're not going to ask questions so politely." I took a drink of my pint. It fell heavily down into my stomach, lying like a lead weight. "I should get going," I said. "The night is young."

"Naw, mate," said Sandy. "This one's old."

I grabbed my car—a flashy new BMW I got at a good price from a satisfied client—and headed out to Lochee, where Dudman's wife now lived in a comfortable semi with her new man. I didn't have much on him, but it was the ex-Mrs. Dudman I wanted to talk to anyway.

The semi had a small garden out front. There was a pond with fish in it. I stopped on the path for a moment to look at them. They swam around under the surface, creating patterns with their movements I doubt they were even aware of.

The front door opened and a female voice said, "Who are you?"

I looked up and saw a woman in her mid forties standing on the front step. She wore a white dressing gown wrapped tight round her body. She was skeletally thin and her skin hung loosely about her frame. Her blue eyes were graying with age and sunken back in her skull. Her hair had been a vibrant blonde once, but now it looked like brittle straw.

"Mrs. Jennifer Dudman?"

"It's Fischer," she said. "Miss Fischer."

"Of course," I said. She'd taken back her maiden name after the divorce. "Nice house."

"I guess. Are you with the polis? I already talked to some wanker called Lindsay. Bloody girl's name!"

"D.I. Lindsay," I said. "Something of a prat. I'm not a copper." I took out my wallet and walked up the path. I handed her my card. "I'm a private investigator."

"Didn't think we had those in Scotland."

"Well, there you go," I said with a shrug.

She looked me up and down. "You look like a scruffy bag of tatties," she said. "I watch those films in the afternoon, ken? With that Humphrey Bogart and all. That's a private investigator, son."

I smiled. "Can I come in?"

"No."

"It's important," I said. "It's about Ally."

"Already told that D.I., I haven't seen him in almost a year now."

"The divorce was amicable."

"Aye; doesn't mean I want to see the toerag again."

"Sure," I said, "but I need to talk to him, Miss Fischer. And besides, this is definitely going to concern you."

She sighed. "I'm no going tae get rid of you, am I, son?"

I shook my head.

"Christ," she said. "Come inside, then. But wipe your bloody feet! No one trails mud round my house, you got that?"

Jennifer Fischer's front room was fairly small and free of clutter. The bookcase set into one wall was filled with a few videos and some pot plants. There were a couple of books there as though in concession to the actual purpose of the cavity. They looked new and I guessed she wasn't much of a reader.

She threw herself into a ragged brown armchair. She didn't bother inviting me to sit. I stood, anyway.

"Like I said, I haven't seen him." She looked at me with hard eyes, as though she was challenging me to contradict her. "In over

a year," she said, emphasizing each word in case I hadn't caught that information outside the house.

"Sure," I said. "The two of you didn't talk, right?"

"Bloody toerag!" she said, condensing her feelings toward Ally in four forceful syllables. "What do you think?"

I nodded. There was a small coffee table with an ashtray sitting in the middle of the room. Two cigarettes were crumpled in there. It made me wish I could spark up. I'd been trying to give up lately—Ros's idea—and now I was starting to see temptation round every corner.

"So I haven't seen him," she emphasized once more.

"Okay," I said. "But you know him better than most people. I mean, where else would he go if he needed a place to hide?"

She shrugged. "Just about any bloody pub," she said. "That'd be a good start. Or the bookies."

"You know he's in danger," I said.

"What? From the polis?"

I shook my head. "He was working with the police," I said. "Maybe he was trying to turn his life around, I don't know. But he was working with them, and now that he's done a runner, the people he was helping the police to nick are probably going to be after him."

I walked to the bookshelf. I scanned the unbroken spines. A few Grishams, a *Guinness Hit Singles*, and *The Atkins Diet*.

"They're not nice people," I said. "They're pretty dangerous people, actually." I kept my tone light and airy, like I did this kind of thing all the time, like it didn't matter to me really one way or the other whether the Kennedy brothers got their hands on wee Ally Dudman.

"That's too bad," said Jennifer Fischer. "For Ally, I mean." But her tone trembled slightly.

The front door opened. "Jennifer?" shouted a gruff man's voice. "You in there?"

A burly ball of sweat came into the living room. He stopped and looked at me suspiciously, his small eyes narrowing. "Who're you?"

"Sam Bryson," I said. "I'm a consultant with the police force. Just here to ask Miss Fischer a few questions about her ex-husband."

"Can't you bloody people leave her alone?" thundered the ball of sweat. I tried not to look at him directly. He was a hard man in the worst sense of the word; direct eye contact would be like a red flag to a bull. And I was no matador.

"I'm sorry to intrude," I said. "I didn't mean to cause Miss Fischer here any trouble."

"I think you should leave," he said.

I glanced at Jennifer Fischer out of the corner of my eye. She was trembling. It was barely perceptible, but I could see it. It was a look I'd see many times. She was petrified of this man. I wondered what would happen after I was gone.

I walked past the big man and out of the house. I turned when I got to the gate and looked at the living room window. Jennifer Fischer knew something. Given time, she might even have told me. But now that the bruiser had walked back into her house, she'd just clammed up. It would give him just one more reason to beat the snot out of her.

I called Sandy from my mobile.

"Hey," he said. "Any word?"

"I think he's been to see his ex," I said. "But she's not saying anything."

"Still sweet on him?"

"I just don't think she wants her new man to find out," I said.

Sandy was silent on the other end of the phone. I could sense his body tense, his fists close together. I knew the look he'd have in his eyes. His weakness, the one thing he couldn't handle in a calm and rational manner, was wife beaters, child batterers. To Sandy they were the worst possible kind of criminal. It was personal. His own father had killed Sandy's mother. Sandy may even have killed his own father; it was a part of his life I'd never fully understood, a place he'd never let me into. All I knew was that it was an aspect of his police work he took seriously enough to bend more than a few rules to bring a conviction against anyone guilty of domestic abuse. The current advertising campaigns by the Scottish Exec advocate a zero tolerance of domestic violence: Despite his deceptively skinny frame and thinning hair, Sandy could be the embodiment of true zero tolerance.

"Okay," he said, eventually. "Try the mother, see if you can get anything from some of the bars. The Crow and Claw, perhaps. Maybe Big Ian'll know something."

"What are you going to do?"

"I might pop in and see if I can get Miss Fischer to be more cooperative."

"What about her man?"

"He's just going to have to lump it," said Sandy. "Official police business and all."

After I hung up I looked back at the house. The curtains had closed. The house had swallowed Miss Fischer and what had been a promising initial inquiry.



There was no answer at Dudman's mother's house. She lived in a purpose-built council semi in a small cul-de-sac of Identikit houses, separated only by the color of the front doors. I persisted for a few minutes.

The door of the house next door opened. An old man in a dressing gown stepped onto the front step and looked at me. "What do you want there?"

"I need to speak to Mrs. Dudman."

The old man laughed and scratched at his neck like he had fleas. "You won't get her," he said.

"Why not?"

"Been gone. Three days."

"Gone?"

"Dead, son," said the old man. He stopped laughing and his face hardened with the doomed wisdom of age. "Dead."

"Did you know her well?"

"Why do you want to know?"

I shrugged. "I knew her son."

"Get the hell out of here," the old man hissed. "Just leave her alone!" He went back inside and slammed the door. That told me all I needed to know about Dudman's relationship with his mother. I'd reached another dead end.

Big Ian Machie was behind the bar in the Crow and Claw when I walked in. He wore a horizontally striped polo shirt and black trousers. The "middle-age" spread seemed to have grown since the last time we talked. I didn't want to bring it up, however. It'd only piss him off. Nevertheless, despite the advance of the years, he still looked more than capable of holding his own against any of the rough crowd who composed his regular clientele.

"Sammy," he said. "No seen you round here in a while."

I smiled, grabbed a seat at the bar. Big Ian pulled me a pint without asking. I figured one couldn't hurt too much. I was driving, but sometimes you have to make these sacrifices.

"I've not been in the area," I said.

"No one's around these days," he said with a sigh. He looked at the bar. People congregated round the tables, leaning into their small groups like they were afraid someone was listening. "No one worth bothering about, anyway. All the old crowd have gone. They either got respectable or they got into trouble."

"What about Ally Dudman?"

"Whit am I now, yer wee snitch?"

I smiled. "Ally's the snitch, or hadn't you heard."

"He was in trouble with the Kennedys right enough," said Ian. "Mind you, Ally's the type of bawbag who'd get in trouble with just about anyone."

"I need to find him, Ian," I said.

He put the pint on the bar. Some of the head broke off, drifting down the smooth edges of the glass.

"How would I know where he is?" asked Ian.

"Ally was still a regular," I said. "You're known for your loyalty."

"Even to wee bawbags who went and joined the coppers," he said, pointedly.

"I'm not a copper these days."

"Just as bad. You work for them."

"I do favors for friends sometimes," I said. "Some of those friends are in the law enforcement business."

He chuckled at that.

"Ally's life is in danger," I said. "I'm looking to help him."

"Aye, and what about your friend?"

"He's looking to help too," I said. "All we want is to help Ally."

"He was in here about half an hour ago," said Ian. "He asked me for help."

"What did you say?"

"I said I couldn't help someone so messed up as him."

"You couldn't help a wee bawbag like that, you mean?"

"Aye, that's it," he said. "Look, Sammy-boy, I don't know what all this is about, ken, but Ally looked in a bad way."

"Where would he go if you couldn't help him?"

"There's a few places," Ian said.

I nodded. I took a deep drink of the pint.

"He couldn't go home," Ian said. "No if he was in trouble with the Kennedys. So he'd need money and clothes and all that if he wanted to get out. I'd say he'd go to see Omar."

"Omar? I can't see the two of them exactly getting along."

"Omar doesn't care about that kind of crap, Sammy. All he cares about is making sure his family are taken care of. All he cares about is where the next bushel of money comes from."

I nodded. I didn't want to go and see Omar, but Ian was right. If Ally wanted money, clothes, and a quick, quiet escape from the city, he'd go and talk to Omar.

It was ten to eleven by the time I reached Omar's pad. Omar operated out of a high-rise in one of the poorer areas of the city. He was one of those men who had a finger in almost every pie,

but was careful enough not to get any filling stuck under his nails.

When I knocked at his door, his brother answered. Yafit took one look at me and shook his head. I knew what he meant: Omar didn't like me. We'd only met a few times, but those few times had been enough for Omar to know we'd never be friends.

When Omar finally came to the door he was dressed in a sharp gray suit. Last time we'd talked he was clean shaven, but now he'd grown a beard. It was flecked with gray. I guess he must have been approaching fifty.

He looked at me like I was some kind of insect. Finally he said, "I know why you're here."

"You do?"

"Raise your arms."

I did so. He gestured for his brother to come out into the hallway. Yafit patted me down. He took my cell phone out of my pocket and turned it off.

"You'll get that back when you leave," said Omar.

I nodded.

Yafit stood up straight and nodded to his brother. Everything was okay; I was clean.

"I suppose you can come in," said Omar.

We walked through to the living room. A wide-screen TV hooked up to a DVD player was showing *Pulp Fiction*. The picture had paused on Uma Thurman and John Travolta dancing to Chuck Berry.

"Nice setup," I said, nodding to the TV.

Omar grinned. "I know a guy," he said. Then his face became stony once more. He gestured to the sofa. I took a seat. Omar remained standing.

"You know why I'm here," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Ally Dudman."

I waited.

"You do favors for the police. Ally was doing a favor for the police."

"Don't waste my time," I said.

"I'll waste as much of it as I want," Omar said. "Mr. Bryson, you do realize that you and I are not exactly on friendly terms."

I smiled. "Sure," I said. "But these days there's not a lot of people with whom I am on friendly terms."

"After all, on a few occasions you have inconvenienced me."

I shook my head. "You mean those illegal immigrants? The guys you faked passports for? The criminals you sneaked into this country?"

"They had regrettable pasts, Mr. Bryson. But none of us are angels."

"In any case, that was just an unhappy coincidence, considering I was following up on a young girl who'd disappeared with one of your associates."

"Not only do you disrupt the business of people like myself, but you insist on horning into a burgeoning love affair."

"She was thirteen."

"And burdened by archaic laws that forbade her to express the love she felt for my friend."

I snorted, trying not to let myself erupt into laughter. I knew he was trying to ruffle me on purpose—any excuse to throw me out of his pad arse first.

"But what is the use in talking over old times, Mr. Bryson?"

"Ally was going to help us bring down the Kennedys," I said. "He was supposed to give evidence tomorrow. If he doesn't show, that's all the evidence down the crapper."

Omar shrugged.

"Don't pretend you don't care," I said. "I've caused you a few minor headaches, but the Kennedys are a full-blown migraine. I know you've been wanting to expand your business opportunities, Omar. But everywhere you turn, people are scared of the Kennedys and the power they wield, so they fob you off with some excuse, or they back down after one of the Kennedys' friends has a word in their ear."

Omar kept his poker face up, but I knew I was getting to him. After a while in my line of work you begin to develop an extra sense about people, like you can see inside their heads, even when they're giving nothing away. It's not infallible, but the odds are usually pretty good, and someone like Omar I thought I knew well enough to read accurately.

Finally Omar said, "I gave Ally a train ticket to Manchester. Some friends were to meet him down there, give him a head start, keep an eye on him, and make sure he paid the amount upon which we agreed."

"When does the train leave?"

Omar looked at the clock on the wall behind me. He smiled. "You've got ten minutes, Mr. Bryson. I hope you're a good driver."

As I pulled into the car-park, I was thankful that Dundee is such an odd little city. Dundee rush hour lasts from about five o'clock until maybe six or, at the latest, half-past. After that, taxis aside, the city is easy to navigate. And the police seemed to be sleeping

on the job, which meant I got down to the station with minutes to spare.

I jumped out of the BMW, already running as I threw the door shut behind me, and sprinted into the station. At this time of night, it was empty. The newsstand looked almost dead with the shutters down and the newspaper racks emptied.

The platforms and departure lounge are down a long, steep flight of stairs. I stumbled down, managing to keep my footing by miracle of grace. There was only one other person in the departure lounge, a tramp with a green sleeping bag. He opened his eyes when he heard my footsteps clattering off the linoleum floor, then he decided I wasn't a threat and lay back down on the bench he'd taken for a bed.

My heart jumped in my chest as I realized I might be late. British Rail had a knack for their trains running early when it was least convenient. The rest of the time they'd be late by several hours, but whenever you had a deadline to worry about they would be running early.

I looked at the departure/arrival board. Only one train scheduled to arrive in the next few minutes. It was heading to Glasgow, but I guessed Ally was going to change there and get the overnighter down to Manchester.

Under my feet the ground rumbled. The train was getting close. I ran out the doors to my left and onto platform three. Looking up the tracks, I could see the signs for platform four where the train was supposed to make its stop. Already the train's lights were in plain view. There was a solitary figure standing near the edge of the platform. I started to run toward him, fishing my mobile out of my pocket and hitting Sandy's number. He answered quickly, and I said, "Train station," before hanging up.

Ally looked at me as I ran up to him. He looked like a startled rabbit. His eyes widened and he took a step away from me, his legs buckling beneath him.

"Ally," I said. "I don't want to hurt you."

"That bloody D.I. sent you, didn't he?"

"Aye, Ally, he did."

Ally straightened a little. He looked wary. "I have tae go," he said.

"No, Ally, you're going to stay here and you're going to testify against the Kennedys."

"Get tae hell!" Ally said. He was laughing as he did so. The laugh was nervous, the kind of laugh you have when there's a knife-edge resting against your jugular. "This is too dangerous for me, man. I made a mistake, awright?"

"Ally, your testimony's important."

"I don't care! I never thought it through properly, man. You dinnae mess about with the Kennedys, like. They're the Royal Family, man. They got connections everywhere. They know where you sleep, where you eat. I'd never hae made it through tae the testimony."

"You were under police protection."

"Like that makes a bloody difference!"

The train pulled up beside us. The doors opened.

"I'm getting outtae here," Ally said, stepping across the gap.

I lunged forward and grabbed him by the collar. He made a little strangled sound as his shirt tightened round his throat. He fell backward. I stepped aside and he landed arse-first on the platform. He tried to stand up, but I kicked my foot down on his chest.

Passengers on the train looked out the windows, gawping as I applied pressure to Ally's chest. No one did anything, however. It's a peculiar trait of people that they can just stand by and idly watch as someone gets their arse handed to them on a plate. I kept Ally there on the ground with my heel digging into his chest until the train pulled away from the platform again. Once the train was gone, I lifted my foot. Ally stood up cautiously. He tugged at his shirt to straighten it out. "Arsewipe," he muttered.

Name-calling wasn't going to do him any good. "You're going to be a good citizen, Ally," I said. "Believe me, it's a good feeling."

"Aye, I'm king of the world," said Ally. "Christ, give it two days and I'll be in a hole in the ground."

"You won't. They can protect you, Ally. They know what they're doing!"

Ally laughed. "Aye, sure," he said. He sighed. "Come on then, if we're going."

As we walked down the platform, he chuckled and said, "Dead wanker walking!"

"Cheer up," I said. "They were going to give you a nice hotel."

Sirens began to blare in the near distance.

"They're coming for me," he said.

"Aye, that's right," I said.

"They're going tae be pissed off, right?"

"Maybe a little."

"I hurt two of their officers, like." He took in a deep breath.

"Maybe it's no just the Kennedys I have tae worry about."

"This isn't L.A.," I said. "You're not Rodney King."

He looked at me strangely. "Who?" he said. I let it go.

We were about to head back into the station itself, out of the cold night air. Someone came out of the departure lounge, bumping into us. I registered that he was a big guy, but didn't think much of it.

"Sorry, mate," he grumbled and kept going.

"Arsehole," muttered Ally.

I started to walk inside.

"Hey, Dudman!" shouted the big guy.

When Ally turned, I knew something was wrong. I went to push him out the way as the big guy threw back the raincoat he was wearing and pulled out a shotgun. I watched this happen in slow motion, pushing Ally as hard as I could, trying to get him on the ground.

I looked at the big guy's face, now that he was standing under one of the yellow lights that illuminated the platform. I recognised him: it was the guy I'd seen at Jennifer Fischer's place.

Ally stumbled toward the tracks, as if hoping he could somehow leap down there and get out the way. But he was too slow. And I was too slow. It was so hard to move, to think straight, to make the right decisions.

A moment's hesitation and the big guy pulled the trigger. The explosion was so loud I felt like my head was going to explode. But it was Ally's instead. The side of his head ripped outward as he spun with the force of the impact, flesh flapping loosely. He smashed to the ground. His body rolled with the momentum, and he tipped over the edge of the platform down onto the tracks.

The big guy smiled and walked toward me, the shotgun held high. I kept my ground, my eyes locked with his, my face as still as I could manage. I was giving nothing away.

"I know you," he said.

"We've met."

"You're a tit, you know that?"

"At least I'm a left tit, not a right tit," I said. Which, in retrospect, was not a cunning plan: it's never a good move to piss off the guy holding a shotgun.

"The police are coming," I said, trying to play for time.

"Guess I'd better be quick," he said.

The sirens had gone silent now. They were here, probably coming down the stairs. I just had to keep him talking for a moment more.

But it wasn't going to happen. He knew as well as I did that this was no time for him to be dicking around. His finger tightened on the trigger.

I faked right and then shifted my weight, diving left, pushing the glass doors inward to the departure lounge. I fell through the door and hit the ground with my shoulder, rolling and ignoring the

pain. I heard the shotgun blast and the shattering of glass. I rolled onto my back. I couldn't keep going. The momentum died a death and I lay on the floor.

I heard footsteps and shouting. Someone was kneeling beside me.

"Sam, you okay?" It was Sandy.

"That bastard with the shotgun," I said, my voice rasping with effort, "shot Dudman."

Sandy helped me to my feet. We ran outside. Two P.C.'s were pursuing the big guy with the shotgun down toward platform four. He was running with his back to them.

Sandy said, "He's going to run out of platform."

He was quick for a guy with such a bulky frame. He stopped suddenly, turning on his heels and raising his gun.

Sandy shouted to the officers, "Get down!"

They hit the deck as the big guy fired off two shots. He stumbled as each blast recoiled. His feet hit the edge of the track. He tried to shift his weight and staggered at the edge of the platform before falling backward, his arms flailing wildly. The shotgun went over with him. There was a final explosion and then silence.

Sandy let loose a lungful of air. He ran a hand through his hair. He looked at me. "You did your best," he said.

"Not good enough," I said. "The Kennedys are going to walk, aren't they?"

"Aye," said Sandy. "Without Dudman, everything we have goes to hell."

I swore.

"I went to have a wee word with Jennifer Fischer," Sandy said. "You were right. That son of bitch pummeled her nearly tae death." He gritted his teeth. "If I ever get my hands on him . . ." he said.

"He's closer than you think," I said. "See that big-boned bastard down on the tracks, that's your man."

Sandy nodded. He walked to the lip of the platform. He looked down at the big man on the tracks below. The big man wasn't moving. His head lay at an awkward angle. "I hope he isn't dead," Sandy said. "That'd be the easy way out of this."

I got back to my place at half past three. I'd spent a few hours talking to Sandy and then Curious George, who said they'd have found Ally Dudman eventually and it was my fault the situation went spinning out of control. I nodded and answered his questions.


Curious George and I have never been friends. I don't care much for his opinion. If he wanted to think I was the cause of Dudman's death, I didn't care. The truth was, Dudman would probably still be dead whether I had become involved or not. Sometimes situations have their own way of developing and it doesn't matter what you do, things will work out the way they want to.

When I got back home, my body ached all over. The stress of being shot at and of seeing Ally Dudman's face being ripped apart by a 12-gauge shotgun had finally begun to manifest itself.

I looked in the kitchen cupboards and saw a half-finished bottle of Jack Daniel's waiting there for me. I thought about it for a moment and then decided that maybe I deserved some of the good stuff for a change.

I reached further back into the drinks cupboard and pulled out a bottle of Glenmorangie. Okay, it still wasn't five star living, but it felt like more of a luxury; a reward for surviving another day.

I heard footsteps behind me. I turned around and saw Ros standing in the kitchen door. Her hair was messed up from being slept on. She shook her head and took a step toward me. Reaching out with her left hand she took the bottle away from me and put it on the breakfast bar. "Not tonight," she said.

She took my hand and led me to the bedroom. 

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

V ZRT RL PDYY MDYY TFN, ADEFKD LFZDAFHT DYLD
HFDL MIRM PD IRMDH DRSI FMIDK. ANM V HVHB'M
LMKRBCYD IDK VB ZT FPB ARSX IRY.

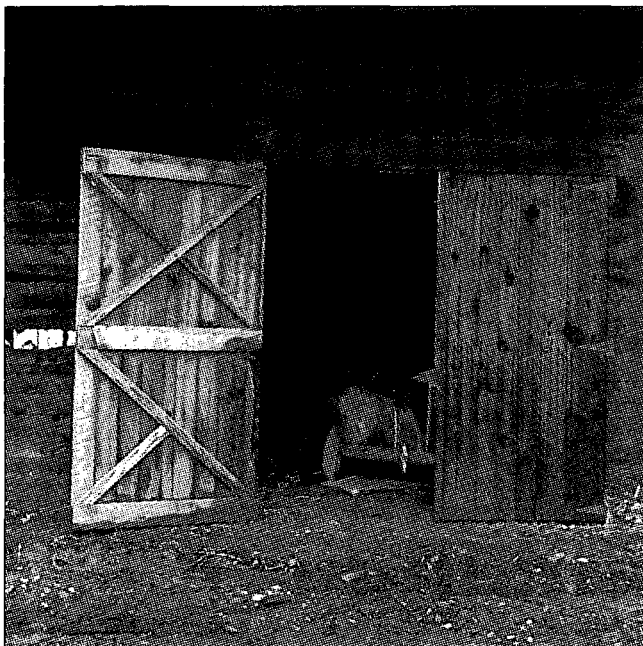
—WFIB I HVKSXQ

CIPHER:

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 138

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



© Henri Silberman. All rights reserved.

After the Horses Have Left

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 139.

THAT THING

DOUGLAS GRANT JOHNSON

The car attracted attention the minute it was parked in front of my shop.

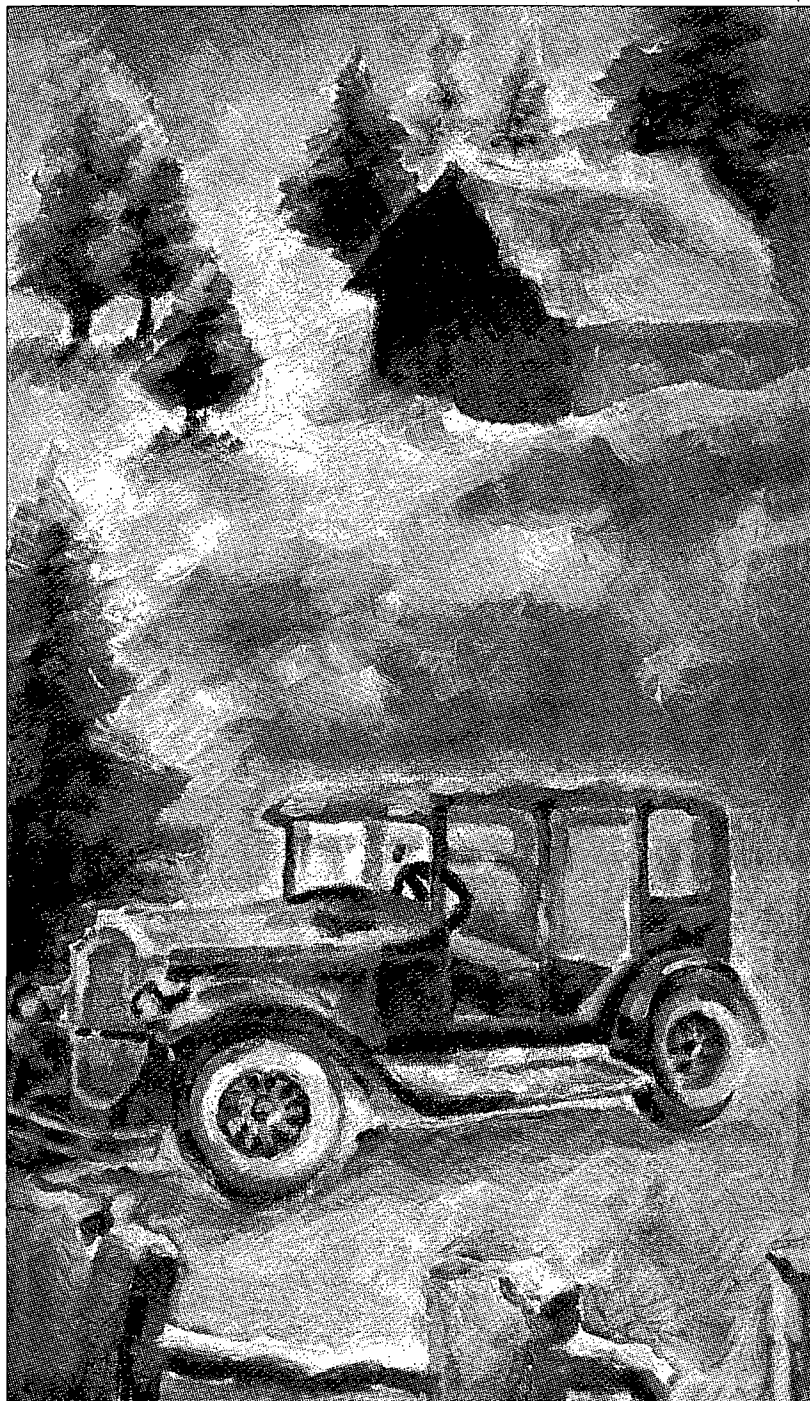
Even so, I was almost sure my chances of selling it were about equal to my chances of opening a school for pearl divers.

Early in the summer of the second year after I opened the Cliff Mills Garage I agreed to help Mrs. Albee sell a 1925 Dodge sedan that used to belong to her husband. The past tense refers to her husband, Lester Albee, who is no longer living, not to the car, so she was perfectly able to sell it if she wanted to. Just thought I ought to clear that up.

The car wasn't much and that's why I didn't think anyone would be clamoring to own it. First, there was the price. She wanted seventy dollars for it, which I thought was about eighty more than it was presently worth. Plus, she wanted me to tack my commission on top of the seventy.

The car was only seven years old, but when a car lives on a farm, the years are hard years. This one looked like it was pushing thirty. It was a four-door sedan. Or, it would have been if all four of them weren't missing. The story was that after her husband bought a new car a couple of years ago, he started using this one like he would a pickup truck around his farm. He found that he could spend a lot of time opening and closing those doors, so he took them off, along with the rear seat cushions. This also gave him the advantage of letting larger loads stick out, which would not have been possible with doors to worry about. The inside had ample remnants of everything that had ever been hauled in it, including, it seemed, the type of fertilizer a cow barn generates in generous quantities. The fenders were also in rather sorry shape, suffering from many scratches and dents and from having lost most of their paint.

Another problem might have been that everyone in town knew



her husband was in it when he died. Oh, and did I mention the neat hole through the windshield on the driver's side?

That's where the bullet went through that struck him between the eyes.

Lillie, my wife, thought it made my auto repair shop look like an auto junkyard and she was right. But I took on the car because I thought I'd try to do something nice for the woman. After all, she had just lost her husband and was unexpectedly left with sole responsibility for the operation of a large and apparently prosperous farm, something fairly unusual in those days.

The car had been parked in front of my garage for about two days when Dave Henley came by to pass a few minutes of his and my day. He was a friend whom I'd known since we first moved to this community. He lived on the outskirts of town and operated a large farm nearby. He was also the town marshal and, like the mayor and the two city councilmen, had a desk in a small building we called city hall. But in this small town, the local government was not intrusive. In fact, their jobs were mostly ceremonial. The city recorder was the only one that actually had to keep office hours there, and she brought her knitting. It was a system that worked pretty well. We didn't much bother them and they didn't much bother us.

Dave had never once in two terms as marshal actually found it necessary to arrest anyone. Not that he didn't have something to do once in a great while, it's just that he took care of things by spotting problems while they were still in the bud and letting potential offenders know he expected better of them. When it came to more serious stuff like the shooting of Lester Albee, the county sheriff handled things. Albee's farm and the road where he and his car were found were out in county jurisdiction, so Dave had nothing to do with the investigation anyway.

"She really expect someone to pay money for that thing?" Dave called. I laid down my tools and joined him in front of my shop where he was studying the FOR SALE-\$70 sign I had hung from the radiator cap. "Surprised you let her talk you into leavin' that thing here."

"Runs good, as long as you don't expect much in the way of looks."

Dave gave me a skeptical look, one like I might get if I ever tried to sell him, say, a camel. "Runs good, eh?" His large frame shook as he chuckled.

"He brought it in a couple of times, had me give it a good tune

up and fix a few other things. It may not look great, but it's in good shape, and it's dependable."

"Puttin' the doors back on might help some to sell it," he said.

"Mrs. Albee said she doesn't know where they are. Hasn't seen 'em anywhere."

"Could be she just hasn't looked real careful. Folks around here never throw anythin' away, 'less it starts gettin' underfoot. Person can never tell when a part off somethin' might be useful for somethin' else with a little cuttin' or weldin'." Dave walked around to stand by the radiator and face the hole in the windshield. "There's somethin' don't quite make sense in this whole thing here. Can't quite lay hold of it, though."

"Sheriff's business anyway, isn't it?"

He nodded. "They're figurin' it was some hunter out in the woods plinkin' rabbits, an' there's Albee, just drivin' by on his way to town . . . an' bang! He's in the wrong place, wrong time." Dave took aim at a pebble on the ground and kicked it to one side. "Still . . ."

"I can see it might be hard to find who it might have been."

"'Less the hunter grows a conscience an' turns himself in."

"If it was just an accident . . . careless shot . . . maybe he doesn't even know."

"Hard to figure he wouldn't put two and two together. Law has some formalities even if it was accidental. Wouldn't think it would mark him as any kind of a criminal."

"He's probably scared."

"I'm sure."

"Are you thinking it might be someone in town here?"

"If I was to start thinkin' I'd also have to include the whole town of Canebreak on the other side of the woods where Albee was shot. And 'bout fifty farms in between here and there. Prob'ly include three, four thousand people, if you include women and children." He shrugged his shoulders, lost in thought for a moment. "How's your grain supply holdin' out?"

"You needing some repair work done on your truck again?"

What he referred to was a deal we had struck just after we had come to town. We, meaning my wife, Lillie, and our son, were refugees from the crash of twenty-nine, the Depression, unemployment, and the big city. We moved into a house belonging to Lillie's aged grandparents who were now living with one of Lillie's uncles. At the same time, I took over an empty building on Main Street that had once housed a blacksmith, opened an auto repair shop, and hired myself. As you may know, cash was often hard to

come by in those times, and I accepted a large quantity of Dave's grain in exchange for some major repairs to his car. To get some benefit from a couple of tons of his good golden wheat, I raised a flock of chickens and hooked up with a chick hatchery to be one of their egg suppliers. They paid a premium for hatching eggs, and that way we were able to turn that wheat into hard cash. It was a little extra work, but it was easier than trying to turn lead into gold like those old alchemists tried to do. And my way had the advantage in that it worked.

"Truck's runnin' fine, thanks to you," Dave said. "I was 'just thinkin', if you decide to stay in the poultry business, I wouldn't mind turnin' some grain into some of your future services. Sort of puttin' a few hours in the bank, so to speak, in case of need."

"I don't know . . . since she's been expecting, Lillie's been looking forward to the end of the poultry enterprise. On the other hand, Jason Locke's boy, Harold, has been coming by every afternoon lately to carry feed and gather the eggs for us. With his help, she's been appreciating the egg check from the hatchery a little more."

"Just let me know if you need anythin', Cliff." He waved and returned to his pickup.

I returned his wave and stood for a few moments looking at Mrs. Albee's car, trying to picture what it might be that was troubling Dave.

It was a slow day after Dave left and by four o'clock I'd had enough boredom. I decided to go home early and mow my lawn, which was more than a week overdue for trimming. But when I arrived, Harold Locke was already more than halfway through the job.

"Mowing the lawn wasn't part of our deal, Harold. You don't have to do it."

"I know, Mr. Mills," he said, "but after I finished with taking care of the chickens, I happened to notice it was gettin' a little long again, an' . . ."

It wasn't the first time I had reminded him it wasn't part of the deal.

The deal started back in the late spring when I had done some major repair work on his folks' car. They were suffering, like a lot of us, from the effects of the bad economy. For what little work Mr. Locke had been able to get, he had to drive over to the county seat. He had been able to pay part of his bill and I'd been willing to forgive the balance he would owe. Heaven knows, the family needed the help. But Locke wasn't the sort of man who would hear of it.

His son Harold came to me one day and offered to work for me to pay the balance of his father's bill. Perhaps they had a family council about it, or maybe it was Harold's idea, I don't know. But I thought about it a bit and said he might be of real help to me with my chickens and keeping our small garden weeded. The garden was a chore my wife had taken care of last year, and in these times having a garden sometimes meant having a decent meal on the table.

I was glad for his help because this year Lillie was expecting our second child. Feed buckets and egg baskets were getting kind of heavy for her, and hoeing weeds always induced a lot of back pain, something she had plenty of just by carrying what we both hoped would be a little sister for Billy.

But Harold was a husky lad and none of it would be too hard for him. He accepted cheerfully. It usually took him less than half an hour a day after school for the chores with the chickens, and when school let out for the summer he had kept the same schedule.

"I hoped I'd have it done before you came home," Harold said. He looked a little sheepish as he said it.

"I didn't mean it as chastisement, Harold. It's just that a deal is a deal . . ."

"My folks . . . well, we appreciate you fixin' our car like you did. Pa says he almost lost his job when he couldn't get to work."

"And I appreciate your help. You've been very reliable with the chickens and the weeding. You're a very conscientious young man, but—"

An odd expression on his face interrupted the rest of my thought. Perhaps he wasn't sure if I had just paid him a compliment or not. "I guess I mean to say you are the type of person who listens carefully when your conscience tells you things," I finally said, trying on a reassuring smile.

He was silent for a moment, staring at the uncut part of the lawn. "Oh."

"Look, I'm glad things worked out for your family. Now you run along and let me finish the lawn, okay? Lying down under cars all day has left me needing a little exercise."

He didn't smile at my little exaggeration, just turned slowly and walked away. I watched him for a moment and hoped I hadn't offended him. Especially since I often did the same kind of little extra things for my customers down at the garage.

I also asked myself if I dared hope our little Billy would grow up with the same sense of responsibility Harold seemed to have.



"Are you starting a junkyard down at your shop, Mr. Mills?" It was Mrs. Constantine, an elderly widow who lived a block from our house. I met her the next day as she was going into and I was going out of the post office.

She was, I was sure, reflecting the opinion of more than a few of my neighbors, but I tried to look puzzled anyway. She continued, "It's that awful old car of Lester Albee's. You've got that thing right there in front of your shop."

I laughed. "Actually, it's for sale. I told Mrs. Albee I'd try to sell it for her. Help her out."

She paused for a moment, considering whether it was a good enough excuse. "Well, I suppose she needs all the help she can get since that dreadful accident with her husband."

"A woman all alone, with that farm and all . . ."

"Although why she thinks anyone would want such an old piece of junk with no doors, I'll never know."

"She seemed like a nice lady. Did you know her?"

"Hardly. The Albees kept to themselves a lot. No one really knew either of them well. Hannah, only to speak to at church. She attended once in a while. Lester, never. Always busy, even on Sundays. Their boy went into some kind of business up at the capital. Haven't seen him much since he finished high school. I'd be surprised if he had any interest in coming back down here to take over the farm. Wouldn't surprise me if she'll be selling off the place now. Lester was closing in on seventy and she's only a few years behind."

"That's about time to retire, I'd say."

"I heard she almost had her husband talked into sellin' the place last winter and moving down South. Then at the last minute, Lester changed his mind and said, just one or two years more. What I heard, it was a real big disappointment to her."

"One never knows."

"That's right true, Mr. Mills. He should have sold out and gone when she wanted him to. He'd probably still be alive to enjoy some retirement."

I had no argument with that, so I wished her a pleasant day and turned to go back to my shop.

"I hope you find a buyer for it soon," she called after me. I had no argument with that, either. I could understand how bleak Mrs. Albee's situation might be. And how different it might have been if they had sold and moved.

I thought of my own parents and their own missed opportunity.

Not that a death had come prematurely. But Dad had worked hard as an insurance salesman, had invested for a good retirement where he and my mother could do a little travel. But he'd waited too long to cash out. He lost every dollar of his retirement investments in twenty-nine in the aftermath of the crash. He's doing okay, but people don't have the money for a lot of insurance, so he's not selling as much. Retirement for him is going to be more than a few years away.

There wasn't a lot to do that afternoon but listen to the cars passing by. My shop is on the main street of our town and there's always a little traffic going by. Almost every car would slow as it passed to give the occupants a few extra seconds to gaze at the strange-looking vehicle parked by my door. But it was just curiosity, not interest. No one stopped to kick the tires and have a closer look.

A couple of days later I had just parked a Buick coupe in the shop and had raised the hood when I heard a truck pull to a stop in front. I walked out to see if it might be a customer. Or someone who might have an interest in the Albee car. This time it was a dairy farmer named Giles who lived a couple of miles out of town, over toward the county seat. He was towing a stock trailer, and right away I could see why he stopped. Both tires on the near side of the trailer were seriously low.

"Mind if I use some of your air?" Giles said.

"Not at all." I motioned toward the air hose coiled up by the door. "I'll turn on the compressor, make sure there's plenty of pressure." I never minded anyone coming by to use a little of my air and never charged for it. I figured it would help folks remember me when they really needed my services and it usually worked out that way. When I came back outside he was bent over his tires.

"You have some leaks there you need some help with?" I asked.

"Nah. This is what comes about when my two littlest start wonderin' what would happen if they pushed this little thing here in the middle of the valve stem," he laughed.

"Looks like they must have had quite a time after they found out."

He laughed again. "After a while, they managed to turn it into a game and took turns. Caught 'em before they got to the ones on the other side." I joined him in a chuckle over that picture.

He finished and began to coil up the hose. "Thanks," he said. "I might have stopped by anyway to make sure they were up to pressure. Got a big load to haul today."

"Any time," I said.

"You serious about the price on that thing over there?" He motioned to the car in front of my shop. Nobody seemed to be able to call it a car.

"Mrs. Albee seems to be. It's the one her husband was in when—"

"That's the one, eh? I heard about how that happened. Tough thing. It's her cows I'll be hauling away today."

"Heard a rumor she might be selling off, but I didn't know it would happen so soon."

"I guess with her husband gone, a dozen cows were too much for her to handle alone."

"Didn't want to keep even one for the milk?"

"She's got the whole place up for sale. Said she'd have to hire someone to run the place and it just wasn't worth it. Made me a fair price on the cows if I took the whole herd and hauled 'em away today. Said she couldn't stand one more day of milking."

He put his truck in gear but paused to glance at the Albee car. "A person could finish the job, cut off the back half and make a pickup truck out of it. I'm surprised Albee didn't do that. But for seventy bucks a person could buy a good used pickup." He chuckled as he drove away.

When I arrived home that night, I saw Lillie carrying a basket of eggs from the chicken coops. Evidently Harold hadn't come by. So far, he hadn't missed a day, and that was what struck me as I pulled into the driveway and saw Lillie with the eggs.

"I know. It's not like him," Lillie said when I asked about it. "He didn't send word."

"Maybe he's sick. Last week, he mentioned his mother had some kind of summer flu."

"It's not as though the garden really needs attention this week, anyway."

"You should have let me carry in the eggs."

"I'm not a complete invalid, Cliff. Once in a while can't hurt."

I suppose she was right, but I hoped Harold wouldn't have to miss many days.

Saturdays, my shop is officially closed, but the next morning I went in to do a brake job on my own car. It was almost as old as the Albee car but at least it had all its paint as well as all its doors. And it hadn't been used to haul barnyard stuff.

There were no major problems in disassembling the rear wheels

and drums. I was expecting a quick job of it until I pulled the new brake linings out of the box and discovered they were the wrong ones for my car. I rechecked the stock number on the box label and on the parts invoice. They were the correct ones for my car. At least they had given me the right box, but somebody at the parts factory had put the wrong parts in it.

The picture that came into my mind was of some former bank president who was now working in a parts plant and being so bored that he was putting any old part in any old box. If so, he might be getting his just desserts, but I was the one getting inconvenienced.

My thoughts were interrupted when Dave drove by, slammed on his brakes, and backed up. He stopped in front of the shop next to what everyone was calling "that thing."

But he gave only a passing glance at the old Dodge. Instead, he walked slowly into the shop and dragged a chair over to where I sat staring down into the wrong box. Or rather, the right box but the wrong . . . well, you know.

"You lose something down in that box, Cliff?" Dave said.

"Couple days ago I drove over to the county seat to get some brake linings for my car. Now I have the whole rear end torn down, and they've put the wrong parts in here."

He sat, looking at the box and then at the floor for a long moment before he looked up at me. "I b'lieve I can top any kind of sorrow you got on your plate. I just took the Locke boy over to the sheriff's office this mornin'. Just came back, matter o' fact."

I looked at him, wondering what that was supposed to mean.

He looked out toward Albee's old car for a moment before he spoke. "Remember, we were talking once about someone growin' a conscience in that Albee shooting?" He paused for a beat to see if I remembered. When I nodded, he went on. "Harold and his dad came to see me yesterday afternoon. The boy said he was the one shot old man Albee and said I needed to lock him up."

"Whoosh!" I said. If I had been standing, I'd have had to sit down. The first thing that popped into my mind was my conversation with Harold the other afternoon. Had my remarks about conscience tipped the scales in favor of turning himself in? I must have been lost in that thought for a moment.

Dave brought me back. "Cliff?"

"Oh. Uh . . . he actually said it was him?"

"That's what he said."

"How did it happen?"

"Seems he was out in the woods up north of here that day, about

where the county road and that farm road branch off. The one goin' west past the Albee place. Huntin' rabbits, he said, him and that dog of his."

Dave hesitated as if waiting for some comment from me, but what could I say?

"Harold said it was only after a couple of days that he started thinkin' maybe one of his shots had gone wild. When I saw him, he looked like he hadn't had a wink of sleep in days."

"What did you do?"

"Hey, it's not my jurisdiction, but I'm supposed to be some kind of officer of the law. So I have to take him over to the sheriff and report it." Dave paused, trying to organize his thoughts. "He's a responsible kid. Hard to believe he's a careless shooter. Anyway, it was late in the day when they came over and I wasn't goin' to put him in our little jail. I sent him home with his dad and told them to meet me at the city hall this mornin'. They came right on time and we went over to the county seat to see the sheriff."

"How did that go?"

"On account of the sheriff bein' away for a few days, one of his deputies was in charge. I think if Crocker had been there, he'd have told me to leave the boy in his folks' custody. As it was, the deputy called the county attorney, who's sort of new to the job," he paused briefly before adding, "and who's eager to demonstrate his worth to the people who elected him."

"Which means Harold's still there."

Dave nodded. "Jail over there is only a step or two above my little place. When I left, he was getting acquainted with a couple of the county's leading drunks, not to mention a whole new class of society."

"What rotten luck," I said.

"He says he fired his twenty-two rifle three times. Brought home two rabbits, and his mother made a good rabbit stew out of 'em."

"One bad shot out of three," I said. Neither of us needed to say that was pretty good shooting for rabbit hunting. "I'm sure he didn't do it on purpose."

"No one's sayin' he did. Even the deputy this mornin'."

I thought of a few colorful expressions I'd heard in various places, but I just kept my eyes on the floor and didn't say any of them.

After Dave left I walked home. There wasn't anything I could do about the mess with my brakes until Monday. I had no idea

how I was going to get over to the county seat to get the right parts unless I first put my car back together with the old parts. That and the news about Harold left me feeling like the day had been kicked full in the stomach.

I was so lost in those thoughts I almost didn't notice that the few weeds growing in the garden the past week were now gone.

I found Lillie in the kitchen and was ready to offer a few words of chastisement, thinking she had gone out and done that kind of heavy work. But she cut me off before I could say it.

"Mr. Locke was here this morning," she said. "He apologized for Harold not being here yesterday and said not to worry, he'd finish out what his son was obligated to do."

I sat on one of the kitchen chairs.

"I told him if Harold was sick or something," Lillie went on, "he shouldn't worry about it until he was well again. But he went ahead and did the chores with the chickens and the weeding anyway."

"Did he say why?"

"No, he didn't. He didn't seem angry, just sad, and not too talkative."

"Dave told me why. He stopped by the shop a while ago."

Lillie stopped stirring a soup she was making and moved the pan away from the heat.

"Harold's in jail," I said. "He says he was out hunting in the woods the day Albee was killed. He and his dad came to see Dave yesterday and told him one of his shots must have done it." I told her the rest of the story Dave had told to me.

"Oh, Cliff." Her words were barely audible as she sank into a chair opposite me.

"Dave says he was taking it pretty hard after he realized it might have been one of his shots that did it."

"Poor Harold. Of course he would take it hard."

I sat for a few moments staring at the patterns on the tablecloth. More than a few moments.

Lillie touched my hand. "There's more?"

I looked up at her. "I think I may have had something to do with him being in jail over there." I told her about my conversation with Harold over the lawn mower. "I said something about how I thought he was someone who listened to his conscience. Now he's over there alone, going through who knows what kind of hell. I don't know if I've served him very well with my little speech."

Lillie said, after a small pause, "Cliff, you also have to think how poor Mr. Albee is being served. Or Mrs. Albee. I think you and Harold both did the right thing."

Maybe she was right, but it didn't relieve the ache I felt for the boy. There wasn't much more that could be said, and for a moment neither of us tried. Then our little Billy walked over from where he had been standing in the doorway of the kitchen. I hadn't noticed him there, but he must have heard our conversation because he came over to stand by me and said, "Daddy, is Harold going to stop coming? He's nice to me, not like some kids."

I glanced at Lillie and reached out and gave Billy a big hug. "Don't worry, Billy, everything will be all right."

Lillie gave me a skeptical glance before she got up to serve the soup for our lunch. We ate it in silence. It was almost as if this tragedy had happened to someone in our family.

That evening was a quiet one at our house. Even Billy could tell there was a lot of gloom hanging over us. He's only four years old, but it was easy to picture how I'd feel if someday he were to land in a similar situation.

"So much tragedy from one stray bullet," Lillie said after a long silence. "He mentioned once about going hunting out there. He does it to help with food for his family."

"It was just an accident. It could happen to anyone."

"He's only fourteen. What's going to happen to him, Cliff?"

"I don't know, Lillie," I said. "I don't know." But I said it low enough that Billy couldn't hear.

Monday morning I was hunched over the engine of a four-year-old Chevrolet. The owner had brought it in complaining that, while it ran, it had no power, and he said it had been getting steadily worse over the past few weeks. From the sound of it when he drove it in, it would be more correct to say it barely ran. I said I thought I might be able to find what was wrong, and promised to get right on it.

Troubleshooting any problem with a car is usually nothing more than not jumping to conclusions too soon. You want to look things over and start eliminating things that are obviously not related to the problem. Then you can start going after the things that could be. In this case, the problem was either lack of air, spark, gasoline, or he wasn't putting oil in the crankcase. I quickly eliminated the first two possibilities, and the last, and soon I was holding the problem in my hand.

It was the third one, no gasoline, or at least very little, even though the fuel tank was over half full. That meant something

was wrong with its delivery. I removed the settling bowl, a small glass container which was attached to one side of the carburetor. Gas coming into the carburetor passed through it and gravity was supposed to trap small particles that might clog the tiny passages and fine jets in the carb itself. It was removable so it could be cleaned. One glance at this bowl, which was about two thirds full of reddish rust-looking particles, gave me the clue that the car's owner had neglected this bit of maintenance for a long time and the carb was now seriously plugged up and would need a careful cleaning.

Getting the gunk out of the bowl was easy and I was getting ready to remove the carb itself when I heard Dave's pickup stop in front of the shop.

"I'm on my way over to the county seat," he said, glancing over at my car sitting there with the rear wheels off and the brake linings removed, "and I happened to remember you might need a ride over to exchange some parts."

I had promised the Chev for late that afternoon, so there was plenty of time for the parts exchange. "I'll wash up and be right with you," I said. When I joined Dave a moment later, he was standing in front of the Albee car, lost in thought.

I brought along my old brake linings to make sure of getting the right parts this time. As it was, the man at the parts counter had to open three of the right boxes before he found the right parts in one of them. The parts guy shook his head and apologized. I put the box with the right parts under my arm and went into the showroom to wait for Dave to finish his business and pick me up. I didn't know the nature of his business that morning. He'd been mostly silent all the way over.

There were two cars on display and I walked around both. One was a new sedan and the other was a nice-looking panel delivery truck. I supposed there were some people able to buy them, but none in my circle of acquaintances. I stopped by the panel truck and caught my reflection in the shiny new paint. It was easy to fantasize what it would look like with the words *Cliff Mills Garage* lettered on the side. But the chances of the Cliff Mills Garage ever having such a truck were about on a par with . . . well, that school for pearl divers. Or selling a camel to Dave.

"Make you a deal on this one," a voice said at my ear. It was the salesman, whom I'd gotten to know slightly from my many trips to their parts department. "We brought it in on a special order, but it's been canceled."

"Can't imagine there are many around here who could get a loan for a truck like this."

"That farmer, one who was killed a while back, he ordered it. Albee, his name was. Paid a big cash deposit, said he had cash for the balance on delivery. It came in just a few days before he died, and we were expecting him to come pick it up the day he was killed." The salesman paused for a moment before smiling and going on. "He evidently hadn't told his wife about it before he placed the order, 'cause she came in the next day—real upset she was—and canceled it right off. Got angry when the boss wouldn't refund the deposit."

Another burden for the poor woman, I thought. "She's selling everything, gettin' out of farming, I hear."

"The boss is being kinda tough about it, says we can't refund the deposit until we sell it. If we get less than Albee agreed, he says it will have to come out of the deposit."

"That's why you're offering a deal."

"Personally, I'm sympathetic to the lady, but I just work here, and I like it, especially along about payday."

The salesman walked away in search of better prospects and left me to my dreams of driving over to pick up parts in this shiny new panel truck.

On the way back, Dave got around to what had brought him over to the county seat. "Went to see a lawyer. Williams is my wife's cousin and I had a chat with him about the Locke boy. Told him how the Lockes have no money and no lawyer. Told him he had a chance to maybe do a little good here. Said he'd try."

"Do I take it Harold is still in the county lockup?"

"Williams and I went over and got them to at least move the boy to a cell out of reach of the rest of that branch of humanity they've got in there."

"Any chance of getting him home soon?"

"I think I told you we got a county attorney who's lookin' to store up a few good works against the next election. Right now, he claims he's gettin' some opinions from the state on how the boy ought to be charged."

"How is Harold doing?"

"Try to think of someone who stepped into a slough and has already sunk up to his neck and knows he hasn't touched bottom yet."

Thinking about it that way was easy. I was feeling a bit of it myself for perhaps having some part in putting him there.



"Cliff," Dave said as he pulled to a stop in front of my shop to drop me off, "you think if you cleaned up that thing some, it might help sell it?" He was looking at the Albee car again.

"Do you think so?" I asked him back.

"On the other hand, with everything else being the way it is, maybe not."

"Yeah. Waste of time." I was looking at all the dents and rips in the fenders, and at the paint which had lost its gloss years ago and was beginning to take on the color of rust. "Even the back window is gone."

"He knocked that out a while back so he could haul some longer stuff from the lumber yard. Come to think of it, I do seem to remember it was runnin' pretty good last few times I saw it passin' by."

"You getting interested in that thing, Dave?" The words just slipped out. I was calling it "that thing" myself.

"Not a chance. You notice I've already got a truck for that kind'a work." He paused to give the thing the same skeptical look he had used before.

Over dinner that night I told Lillie the latest news about Harold. It was another quiet meal.

Later in the evening I described the shiny new panel truck I had seen over at the Ford dealer. I was careful to relate it as just another pipe dream. I think she saw through that right away, because she laid her hand on mine and said, perhaps hoping there might be better days ahead, "Someday, Cliff. Someday."

You notice, she didn't say to stop dreaming.

Mrs. Albee came by my shop the next morning. She was looking a little more pale and maybe a bit thinner than usual, like the weight of everything was getting heavy. "Has anyone been interested in that old thing out there?" she asked.

"Not so far."

She glanced at the vehicle and squinted her eyes as if trying to see it in a different light. "I was thinking I may have been too optimistic on the price I wanted. I've been able to conclude other matters quickly, and there only remains the farm and a few minor things. I authorize you to accept any reasonable offer."

"That's fine," I said, even though I was beginning to wonder how likely it was there would be any offers, reasonable or otherwise. "Is there any kind of minimum you'd want me to accept for you?"

"I wouldn't like to give it away."

I thought of Dave's comment a short while before. "If we could find the doors," I said, "and cleaned it up some, that might make a little difference."

"I didn't pay much attention when Lester took them off, and I've never really searched. If you'd care to come out and have a look around . . . put the doors back on and clean it up some . . . I would split whatever you could get. Fifty-fifty."

I thought about that for a moment and wondered why she didn't go looking herself. Maybe it was just one more thing on top of everything else. If I did, I was sure it would take more of my time than I'd get back from even a half share. It didn't matter, anyway. I had already decided not to add a commission on the sale and I'd likely not accept the split either, if it would help her out . . .

"I'll drop by the first slow day I get."

She nodded and turned to leave. I was briefly troubled that she hadn't voiced a "thank you," but I quickly chalked it up to being overwhelmed by everything.

Most of my days are somewhat slow. Repairing cars in our small town is not what you would call a land-office type business.

Lillie thought I was wasting my time, but a couple of days later I drove out to look for the doors. The Albees had a reputation for having a prosperous farm despite the current economic times, but right away I didn't see much having been spent on paint and repairs. There had been a picket fence once.

Technically, it still surrounded the house, but many pickets were missing and only traces of the original white paint were left. The house had been painted the same color at about the same era, but most of it had weathered away and the clapboards were beginning to crack. The barns and outbuildings had never seen paint of any color. The surrounding fields had been planted in alfalfa and wheat, but many farther out had been left untilled. The house itself was of a good size with a porch on two sides. Curtains at the windows and a well-tended flowerbed along the edge of it were the only attempts to beautify it.

Mrs. Albee came out to meet me at the front steps. "I hope I haven't brought you out for nothing, Mr. Mills," she said, waving an arm at the outbuildings. "If those doors were still around, you'd think I might have noticed them."

"As long as I'm here—"

"I've heard they have the person who killed Lester."

"Harold Locke, ma'am. Fourteen-year-old boy, says he was up there hunting."

"He never should have been there. From time to time, Lester would run a couple of beef cattle in that section. That's why he never liked hunters around."

"The boy always seemed like a . . ."

I was interrupted by her glance over my shoulder toward a car that I'd heard coming down the lane. It was a late model LaSalle coupe that looked like it was polished several times a day.

"I suppose," her attention quickly came back to me, "you might as well go ahead and have a look around." Her gesture once again indicated the farmyard. "The shop is locked, but I know the doors are not in there, so you won't need to bother with that. If you don't see them anywhere else it probably means they're gone forever." Her attention left me and settled on the approaching car, now pulling to a stop.

Two middle-aged men got out and walked toward the house. They were well dressed, like businessmen, and wearing deep frowns, like bankers. After a brief glance at me, they turned to Mrs. Albee. From her frown I didn't think she was happy to see them. I quickly moved off to begin my search.

On closer inspection, the barn and the other buildings weren't in much better repair than the house. They were well used and showed it. The cow corrals and stalls were empty now. There were a half dozen pigpens, most of which had signs of being occupied until the past few days. I supposed Mrs. Albee had sold them, too, probably to the packing plant over in the county seat. I noticed there was still a lot of damp, mushy-looking grain in the troughs and guessed the animals had been trucked off in mid-meal about the same time as the cows.

About twenty minutes later I had seen what there was to be seen of the place. Dave had mentioned that if Lester was like most folks he'd never throw anything away and I had to agree. On a farm, where lots of space was available, disposing of something was always more trouble than just setting it aside and forgetting it. On the Albee farm, the castoffs were piled two and three deep. But there were no doors that I could see on any layer.

The last building I came to was the shop. No need to look there, she had said. I gave it only a glance as I passed on my way back to report my lack of success. As I got closer I could hear voices coming from the porch just around the corner of the house. The voices were not loud, but were edged with shards of anger. Mrs. Albee was

escorting her visitors off her porch and toward their car. I heard only snatches of what they were saying.

"... told your man, Lester never said anything about it, and furthermore ..."

"... well, I'm telling ..."

"In any case ..."

"... agreement ..."

"... five hundred and its all yours. Take it or leave it."

"... already mine ..."

The voices lowered, but were still full of anger and I couldn't distinguish words or meaning. I felt a little embarrassed that I was overhearing something private and probably distressing to Mrs. Albee.

Because of that, I decided to stay where I was unless the argument escalated and it looked like I should come to her aid. I killed a few moments walking around the barnyard again until I passed the shop again. Mrs. Albee had said it was locked, but as I got closer I noticed it wasn't. The door was fastened with a hasp and padlock, but it hadn't been snapped shut. Mrs. Albee seemed sure the doors weren't in there, but the voices were still coming from the front of the house and I had time on my hands. Enough to ask, what if they were hidden by something she hadn't bothered to look behind? I hesitated, wondering if I should go ahead and have a look anyway. I finally decided she hadn't actually said not to go in there. That was my excuse as I removed the lock and stepped inside. Like my car repair shop, its furnishings were from different eras and ranged from a hand-cranked forge to a motorized drill press.

Whatever kind of farmer he was, he had evidently maintained some of his equipment well, because the shop had the look and feel of regular use, even if it hadn't been cleaned up since maybe the Civil War. Small items of farm machinery were stacked in the corners. On one side was a shelf full of cans of partly used paint. Brushes had been partially cleaned by brushing the last remainders of paint on the inside walls, then dunking them in a can of thinner which eventually evaporated, leaving misshapen bristles as hard as a rock.

Scraps and pieces of every project that had ever been worked on littered other shelves and corners, from old horseshoes to reaper blades to a bunch of tin he'd been using to make some stovepipes. An almost new blowtorch with a soldering iron in its rack sat prominently on the only workbench that was otherwise clean and neat. Even with all the junk stacked around it was easy to see

there were no doors in here. By that time I decided I'd wasted the morning and headed for the door.

I had just replaced the padlock and snapped it shut when I heard car doors slamming.

As I approached the front of the house, she was glaring at her visitors' car as it moved away. When she heard my footsteps, she turned. I shrugged as if to say I had found nothing.

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry you wasted your time. I can't think what Lester might have done with them."

"Well," I said after an awkward pause, "if they turn up somewhere . . . just let me know."

Her frown came back again and I had the impression her attention was back on the conversation I had partly overheard. It was too bad the poor woman had to endure the unpleasantness of her other visitors, but I thought it better to take my leave without mentioning them. Or my quick look into the shop.

The next morning Dave stopped by, coming from the direction of the county seat. I walked out to meet him, rested my arms on the window of his truck, and waited for him to cut the engine.

After a pause Dave said, "I just came from a hearing. The county attorney found a witness who claims Lester Albee was in the habit of warnin' off anyone found huntin' up in that part of the woods. Claimed he had livestock up in there and he didn't want bullets flyin' anywhere near 'em."

"Isn't that public land up there in the hills?" I said. "Besides, how does that connect to Harold?"

"Boy was in the habit, every few weeks, of goin' huntin' up there, bringin' a rabbit or two home for the family pot. Over there, they're exploring the possibility the boy did it because Albee'd confronted him and told him to stay away."

"Murder? Harold? Isn't that a pretty thin motive?"

"Did I mention the county attorney has ambitions?"

"You did. But what do you think?"

Dave looked anywhere but at me for a moment. "Boy says he musta' done it. Hard to figure, though, he'd do it a-purpose." He shook his head and punched the starter. But before he put the truck in gear he shifted his gaze and spent a long moment looking at Albee's car. "I've changed my mind. Maybe you ought to at least clean that thing up some. Might make all the difference. You might have people pesterin' you day and night tryin' to buy it."

I smiled a thin one and glanced at him. He wasn't smiling. And he heaved a big sigh before saying, "But I been known to be wrong

a time or two." Then he shook his head and drove away. I had the feeling his last remark wasn't about cleaning up the car, and I began to feel a little unsettled.

The rest of the day was a slow one and I spent the first part of it sitting in a chair listening to the cars that passed on the street. They were still slowing as they approached. When that became boring I got up and began sweeping the floor, which really didn't need sweeping, and looking for any stray piece of junk that ought to be thrown away. Unlike farmers who had a lot of space to store their junk, I had always tried to keep a clean, uncluttered shop because things wouldn't get in my way and it was safer.

Later, a local man who worked for the electric company brought in his car. He also brought some of the latest gossip. "Folks say the boy and his family always seemed like nice people," he said. "But I suppose you can never tell what a boy will turn out to be. Especially when he comes from such a poor family."

I didn't know what coming from a poor family might have to do with it, but I didn't ask, since this gentleman might be my only customer for the day and I didn't want to aggravate him. Later, I felt bad that I hadn't spoken up because his comment meant that local opinion might be close to turning against Harold and his family, if it hadn't already.

Reluctantly, I turned to the problem at hand. The gentleman said the starter of his car had become unreliable. The battery had plenty of power, so that wasn't the problem. A quick glance inside the starter housing told me the brushes were worn down to their attaching screws. I removed the starter and carried it over to my workbench.

Replacing these brushes was a little tricky because there just wasn't room to insert enough fingers to hold the new part and get the screw started all at the same time. I had been hunched over the starter, making the best use of the light coming through the back window, when I began to sense that someone was standing silently at my big entrance door. In fact, I could almost feel someone glaring at me, right between my shoulder blades. I hadn't been aware of a car stopping in front, nor had there been any sounds of footsteps. Still, there was a change in the atmosphere somehow.

But I was at a crucial point in securing the last brush. After at least a dozen tries, I was about to get the threads of the screw to take hold and I couldn't stop just then. A moment later the screw was in and I could release my breath and look around.

It was Mrs. Albee. The prickly feeling went away quickly.

Through my big door I could see her standing next to the derelict car as if it were bringing back many sad and painful memories. She seemed unaware of my presence and I thought it would be tactless to suddenly intrude on the moment. What could I say? I had never been close to either her or her husband. She closed her eyes for a moment, then turned and slowly walked away. I was left with a feeling of sorrow for the sudden upheaval that had come into her life. I thought of Harold, too, and the tragedy that had come into his.

When the starter was back in its accustomed place and the car ready for delivery, I again found myself with nothing pressing to do. I walked to the front and looked back at my shop. No question this dirty old car was making a bad impression.

Plus, it wasn't helping Mrs. Albee the way it was.

And there I was without a thing that needed doing for the next while. I grabbed a broom, a bucket of water, and a handful of rags and tackled the car. When I finished sweeping out the floors I had a box full of debris, including a lot of old rusty bolts and nuts, a lot of rusty nails, some bits and pieces of iron pipe, a shiny new hasp with the price tag still on it, plus other scraps of ancient hardware of unknown origin, most of it from under the front seats. There were big spills of dark green paint on the floor of the back seat. It had been cleaned up some, but most of it was still there and nothing I could do was going to get it out. I grabbed a sponge and dunked it in the water. I had brought this so I could clean the front seats, including a couple of small brown bloodstains on the seat backs. But when I looked closely at them I could see that they were not made by blood. The dark patches I had noticed on the top of both seats were nothing more than weather stains from the lack of doors, or more likely from asphalt particles washing down through the fabric roof, which I suspected leaked like a sieve when it rained. I looked around elsewhere. There was no other hint that a drop of real blood had fallen anywhere.

That was a bit troubling. Had Mrs. Albee cleaned up the blood before she brought the car over? Would she? Would the sheriff's people? Probably not.

I stepped back and looked at the car again. There was no doubt about the bullet hole in the windshield, though. The hole was small with cracks radiating out from it. Not too much glass was actually missing because the glass was very tightly fastened top and bottom and on both edges.

I moved a few steps to where I could look over the hood at the

bullet hole, much as I had seen Dave do a few days ago. Right away my attention was attracted to a little glint that seemed to be coming from the back of the car. The sun was at my back and falling on the side of my shop, and I was seeing a bit of that light reflected back through a small hole just under the back window. The back seat was gone, of course, along with the interior fabric, so the sheet metal of the body was exposed. I climbed into the rear of the car for a closer look. There was a hole all right, and its rough edges were splayed to the outside, that is, toward the rear of the car. Looking even closer, I could see bright metal around the edges. The hole hadn't been there long enough to rust!

I climbed back out and went to stand where I had been a few moments before. I peered at the hole in the windshield and tried to imagine what it was that Dave had been looking for. After a moment, it was easy to see. I stooped slightly to line up the hole in the windshield with the light reflecting through the hole in the back of the car. When I did, my line of sight was only slightly above the top of the driver's seat.

I wondered if anyone had noticed that hole in the back before. If Lester had been sitting there, the bullet would have struck his shoulder, and very likely not have continued on to make that neat hole in the back. But everyone knew Lester had been killed by a bullet squarely between the eyes. There was something else about those holes. The glass in the windshield had broken just enough so that it was hard to tell what size bullet had gone through. But that hole in the back . . . well, Harold had been hunting with a twenty-two, and that hole in back sure looked to be a bit large for a twenty-two.

It didn't happen like a light bulb going off over my head, like in the Sunday comics. But after a moment the feeling did come over me that what I was looking at was not the cause of Lester Albee's death.

And if what I was thinking was true, Harold had no more killed him than I had.

I went back inside and sat in my chair to think about what was beginning to form in my mind. I began with Lester intending to retire, then abruptly changing his mind about the same time he ordered a truck he didn't tell his wife about.

I recalled my visit to Albee's shop, and a mental picture came to mind of the scraps still lying around from his last project. And what those scraps might mean. A lot of that tin wasn't tin. It was copper. I hadn't paid much attention when I was there, but now

some things I had seen began to make sense. I had an idea what he might actually have been making, and it didn't seem to be something that would have much use on your average farm. The more I considered everything I had learned in the past few days and the past few minutes—along with Mrs. Albee's conversation with her visitors the day I went looking for the doors—the more things seemed to fall into place. A pattern began to emerge that was as clear to me as the cause of the fouled carburetor had been the other day. The picture wasn't pleasant, but what worried me was that it might be nothing more than my imagination. My next consideration was whether my speculations would make sense to anyone else, and whether I had any business taking anyone's time to listen to them.

It was at that moment the feeling returned. The one from the other day, where I thought someone was watching my back. With it came a recollection of the lock on the shop door at the Albee place. The one she said was locked, but wasn't. Could she have discovered it locked after my visit and then remembered she hadn't locked it after all? Had she then considered the possibility I had explored the inside? And if she thought I had, might she have asked herself what I may have noticed there? And if so, could that somehow account for her visit to my shop while I was working on the starter? Had she intended to ask me if I had gone inside and then decided doing so might be suspicious?

Sure, there were a lot of *coulds* and *might haves* hanging in the air, but after a few moments, I had no trouble deciding my sympathy had been betrayed. I had to look up Dave and bring him over to show him what I'd found. He was a good enough friend he wouldn't laugh too loudly if he thought I was nuts.

"Dave," I said, "that bullet hole was put there in his car before he was ever in it. He was killed somewhere else and it was made to look like he was killed by some hunter. I think someone drove it out where he was found and then put him in the seat."

"Been a slow day in the shop, has it, Cliff?" Dave said. There was a twinkle in his eye, but at least he wasn't laughing out loud when he said it.

"Now that you mention it, it has." I motioned for Dave to follow me to the front of the car. I showed him how I'd discovered the bullet holes were lined up and how there was no sign of blood on the seats.

His expression at once became very sober. "I always thought there was somethin' funny here," he said as he lined up the two

holes. "Never could quite see what it was. I think the light must've been wrong all the times I took a look."

"When you look closely at the Albee place, it actually looks pretty run down. Hay and wheat crops, sure, but a lot of his ground is not under cultivation. He had a herd of cows and a lot of hogs, but plenty of room for more. I saw corrals that hadn't been used in a while and two large empty chicken coops. Still, the Albees seemed to be prosperous when most everyone else around is hurting. Then, Mrs. Albee tried to convince her husband to give up the farm and retire. Evidently he agreed at first, but backed out and said, 'just a while longer.' Mrs. Constantine said that Mrs. Albee was greatly disappointed at not retiring and didn't mind saying so. About that same time he changed his mind, he went over and ordered a new panel truck. Which the salesman over there told me she came in and canceled the day after Lester was shot."

Dave thought that over. "I'll have to admit, I've never been out to his place, don't know anyone who has."

"On top of that, when I went out looking for those missing doors, I noticed that his cows and pigs have been feeding on something that, now that I think about it, looks and smells really strange."

"Like somethin' that's been fermenting?" Dave was never slow in figuring things out.

"Not that I know a lot about that sort of thing, but it could be. In his shop it looks like he's been working with a lot of copper sheet and tube lately." I also told him in detail about Mrs. Albee's visitors.

Dave listened to me but didn't respond right away. He just glanced over at the old car and chewed on his lips for a moment while he worked on his memory. "About three years before you came to town, some government boys were lookin' around out there in those hills north of his place. Never heard they found anythin'."

"Maybe somebody ought to go looking again."

"You think his magic touch at makin' money comes from operatin' an illegal distill'ry?"

"I think maybe there's someplace up in those hills where he didn't want hunters poking around."

"An' are you thinkin', same as I am, about who maybe really killed Lester?"

"I think someone ought to look for bloodstains among the paint spatters on the floor of Lester's shop. I sure couldn't find any in the car. Speaking of paint, there's colors there in his shop and on

the floor of his car that you won't see on anything around the farmyard. And that lumber you said Lester was hauling? I didn't see a stick of wood anywhere out there that didn't look at least twenty years old."

Dave digested that for a moment. "Sheriff Crocker's back. I think I'll drive over to the county seat," Dave said with eyes that were narrowed just a bit, "have a little conversation with him."

The rest of the afternoon, I was busy replacing a radiator. In the middle of it the dairy farmer who had bought the Albee cow herd stopped by. He was towing his stock trailer, this time full of hay bales. "Mrs. Albee made me a deal on the whole stack and this is my third trip to haul it away. When I got to the bottom, over by the back wall of the barn, I found some old car doors that look like they could fit that thing in front of your shop. She asked me if I'd drop 'em off at your place on my way through."

He led me to the rear of his trailer. There, tied onto the tailgate, were three of the missing doors. Two front and one rear door.

"She said there ought to be four and I poked around some with a pitchfork a bit. But three was all there was."

We took them inside and stacked them neatly. Out of the weather like they had been, they looked almost new.

I went home a bit early for dinner that night. I was prepared to make the afternoon tour through the chicken coops to feed the chickens and gather the eggs in case Mr. Locke hadn't been there yet. I knew most of the time he didn't get home from his job until later, and anyway, I wasn't sure how I felt about him needing to substitute for Harold. But the full egg baskets told me that someone had already done those chores. I was about to chide Lillie for breaking her promise to save this chore for me, but she broke in, "Harold was here. Isn't it wonderful? They said it wasn't him who shot Lester. Dave Henley brought him home."

"That's great news! Did Harold say who they thought it was?"

"No, but he seems to think you had a lot to do with proving it wasn't him. How exactly did you do that, dear?"

I told her what I had told Dave this morning. She reached the same conclusion as Dave had, and just as fast.

"Harold is so grateful. He said that when his pa's bill is paid off at the end of the summer, he'll keep on working for us for another year, two years if we wanted, to show how much he appreciates what you did."

"He said that?"

"Twice, actually."

"What did you say?"

She paused, looking me in the eye. "I said you might want to talk to him about that."

"I think I'd better. Keep my supper warm," I said. "I'll be right back."

I found Harold just finishing supper with his family, and after much enthusiasm and many hearty thanks, got him excused so he and I could have a little private talk. He was full of relief and smiles as we sat on the front steps. But it quickly faded and he lapsed into silence. I could see in his eyes he still hadn't fully adjusted to being home. He had been locked up only a few days, but I guess when you're only fourteen any amount of those kinds of days would be terrible days. It would be a while before he could put some perspective on that experience, and that foolish promise he had made to Lillie wasn't going to help him do it.

He would follow through on it, I was sure. But human nature being what it was, I was also sure that in time he'd come to regret making it and begin to resent Lillie and me. He was too young to understand how that might happen or even believe it might. I felt I had to head it off.

He sat, not saying anything. A gloom suddenly settled over him and I could sense it wouldn't take much for tears to come. "Harold, I'm glad you're back home."

"Me too. So's my mom and dad." He was trying to put a smile in his voice again.

"I never did think you would be a careless hunter."

"My pa taught me how to shoot, how to never fire when the shot might hit somethin' you don't want to hit. But I got to thinkin' I must have been the only one out there that day. And maybe I'd done somethin' . . . wrong after all. I really felt bad about it when I thought it might have been me."

"I hope you understand it wasn't anything you did."

"Oh, I do. And we're all obliged to you, Mr. Mills, for what you did. I told your missus I was going to keep on doing chores for you . . ."

"No, Harold, you are not."

He looked at me in silence, almost as if I had slapped him.

"You are not to do anything of the kind."

His look slowly changed into one of confusion. "But if it wasn't for you . . ."

I reached over and touched him on the shoulder to emphasize

what I was about to say. He tensed and pulled away slightly, but I paid no notice. "Harold, you have been doing a few chores to help pay for some services I performed for your father. I appreciate what you've been doing. It helps me and Lillie. And that's okay because you are doing that to pay for things I do to earn my living. And it's good that you would want to help your family this way, but at the end of the summer your pa's bill will be paid in full. And that'll be the end of it. Now, whatever part I may have had in pointing out the real killer . . . well, that's something else entirely. It's not the same thing. I don't do that for a living. Whatever I did was just trying to do the right thing, and that's different. People don't take payment for that sort of thing."

Harold turned that over in his mind for a moment. "Do you think I did the right thing—you know, turning myself in—when I thought it was me that shot Mr. Albee?"

I almost gave him a snappy, buck-me-up reply in the affirmative. But he deserved a better answer and I didn't have one right off. After a moment, I thought it would have to come from him. "You got a few nights in a pretty bad place because you thought you were doing the right thing. What do you think?"

It was his turn to think about it for a moment. "It was a pretty bad place, alright, but . . ." His words were cut off as some dark emotion surged through his frame and squeezed out a couple of tears. "But, the thought I'd killed a man . . . well, I guess that was worse."

"But you didn't."

"I know."

"You'll wake up tomorrow, and every day, and feel a great relief you didn't do anything wrong."

"I think I already feel it."

My thoughts went briefly to Mrs. Albee, who wasn't going to wake up and discover she hadn't killed Mr. Albee. Harold must have been thinking of her too, for he said, "I sort of feel bad for Mrs. Albee."

"However, I don't think her sense of doing the right thing is quite as developed as yours."

He glanced at me and blinked a couple of times, as if that might help him understand. Or maybe he was still blinking away a tear or two. "If you hadn't done what you did," he said, "I'd still be thinkin' I done it. And so would those people over at the county seat. I'm still grateful to you, Mr. Mills."

"Grateful . . . that's okay, Harold. But at the end of the summer, the job is over. However, I will appreciate your continued

friendship." I looked him in the eye to see if he understood.

It took a moment for the smile to come, and when it did he took my hand when I offered it.

"Oh, and there's one more thing," I said as I was turning to leave. "The lawn is my job."

He studied me for a beat and swallowed before coming back with, "'Cause you need the exercise?"

"Yeah."

"Sure. If it'll help you out, Mr. Mills." His smile widened.

With that, I was pretty sure he was on the road to recovery. I just smiled and waved good night and walked into the evening.

It was evening the next day when Dave stopped by to visit Lillie and me.

"She pretty much caved in when the sheriff confronted her with the circumstances," he said. "Didn't take too long for her to show 'em the trail up into the hills. They found a dugout with a couple of elaborate stills, one of which was bigger and looked like it had just been constructed. Way it was set up, he'd have been able to put out some pretty big batches of the stuff up there. Pretty well hidden too. And the outside walls, what you could see of 'em, were painted real nice so they blended in with the scenery."

"That's what all the paint in his shop was for."

"What I heard, they couldn't see the place till they were almost on it."

"That sort of explains why his farm was prospering while many aren't," Lillie said, her mouth dropping open.

"Seems Lester'd been supplying a pretty good grade of illegal spirits to some businessmen up North for some years now. His son was handling the contacts up there. She said they were diluting it with good stuff that came down from Canada and no one was ever the wiser.

"But she was tired of it all and wanted him to be out of the business. He was about to go along with it, till his son got hooked up with supplying more to a different bunch."

"I think I saw a couple of that bunch that day I was out there. They didn't look friendly."

"Word comin' down from the capital this mornin' is, her son has gone on the run. She blames him for changin' old Lester's mind and she had no problem givin' up the names of her visitors, ones you saw that day. I understand the government boys are very happy too."

"I'd be pleased not to be running into any of that bunch around here again."

Dave smiled in agreement. "Up to then, the Albees had a nice nest egg tucked away and she was looking to move somewhere where it's warmer in the winter and enjoy life. But the promise of a lot more money and a hefty advance from his potential customers convinced him to stay in and increase his capacity. Evidently her and Lester, they had a big argument. Maybe she wasn't sure he'd really stop after a couple of years more, or maybe she discovered the order for that new truck, and it was the last straw, and she settled it with a gun. They found some real bloodstains in his shop, by the way." Dave looked up at me as he continued, "Afterward, she fired the bullet through the windshield and put his body in the thing and drove it out there on the road. Thought it would make it look like some hunter did it."

"She was right."

"Deputy who came out to investigate, he reported that's what it looked like to him, and that sort of became the official conclusion."

"But I think you were always a bit troubled, weren't you? I'm thinking about the way you kept staring at that bullet hole in the windshield."

Dave nodded. "Bullet hole always looked to be a bit low. Maybe if I'd have been there when Lester was still sittin' in the driver's seat . . ."

"If you had, do you think things would have turned out differently? Especially for Harold?"

He glanced quickly at me, then let his gaze drop to his hands. "I'd like to think so, Cliff," he said softly. "I'd sure like to think so."

I waited a few seconds, then I changed the subject, "So, how did they feel about letting Harold come home?"

Dave shifted gears and looked at me again. "County attorney was just a bit reluctant. Wanted to see if there was some statute about juveniles hunting rabbits without some sort of supervision. My wife's cousin, the lawyer, pointed out if he wanted to prosecute that, he might have to go after half the juveniles in the county. As for Crocker, he was okay. As I was leavin', he was havin' a sincere conversation with the deputy who found Lester." Dave paused for a slight smile. "He was askin' the unfortunate young man how long it took him to figure it was a huntin' accident, and did he decide that's what it was before or after he got out of his car to look around."

I gave a small chuckle, but it wasn't the kind with any humor in

it. "So nobody looked any more. A sad end for the whole Albee family."

"Thing is, they were doing okay with his cows and hogs too. Hogs can get pretty fat on moonshine slops, and the barnyard didn't do a bad job of masking the smell."

"Did she show any feelings about letting Harold take the blame for it?"

"I think she was perfectly willing to let him . . . maybe she thought since he was just a boy, they wouldn't do much to him."

"Nothing much except ruin the boy's life!" Lillie spoke up and slammed her palm against the arm of her chair. "I was prepared to feel a little sympathy for the poor woman until you said that."

Dave and I looked at each other. It pretty much summed up our thoughts too.

Several weeks later, Mrs. Albee's attorney called to ask whether I'd seen any interest in the old car. By then, I'd cleaned it up a bit more and replaced the three doors. The back was still missing a door and it would need a new windshield glass. Even so, the car was halfway back to looking normal.

I had to tell him there had not been a single inquiry. He responded by saying I was authorized to accept any offer, no matter how low.

Not long after that, I began to visualize what it would look like if I were to cut off the body just back of the front seats. I could move the back wall forward and fix the roof. To finish it off I could pound out the dents and give it a new paint job. And make a nice big varnished wooden box for the back. You know, give me something to do on the slow days. As a pickup truck, perhaps it would look pretty nice. And the missing rear door? Well, that way it could just stay missing forever.

I'm not sure how Lillie will react to this idea, but I'll point out to her how proud she'll be to see me drive over to the county seat in a spiffy-looking truck with CLIFF MILLS GARAGE lettered on the doors.

The big question was, if I did all that, would people stop calling it "That Thing"? 🐦

THE ELEVEN O'CLOCK NUMBER

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

Jackie Mack was a man of habit, none more certain than his arrival at Ye Jesters Club punctually at three o'clock every weekday afternoon. Jackie billed himself as "The Clown Prince of Comedy," but to everyone else in the business he was "Milton Berle on a Budget," and he took the comparison as a compliment, the same way he took Berle's style of comedy for his own when he came along a decade later. It had served him almost as well as it had served Uncle Miltie.

In a career that spanned sixty years (and counting), Jackie Mack had leaped from his days as a baggy-pants, bottom-of-the-bunch beginner in the fading days of burlesque to top-of-the-heap stardom on Broadway and television, in films and Las Vegas, even on recordings, where his "Mack Attack" machine-gun delivery of jokes had hogged the best-seller charts for a year and a half.

He was an Oscar winner, an Emmy winner, a Grammy winner, a Tony winner, and, currently—

A Trivial Pursuit question getting tougher and tougher to answer everywhere but in the retirement communities he'd been reduced to playing—to senior citizens who found pleasure in remembering yesterday as if it were tomorrow, maybe because yesterday was more certain.

Jackie was a hero among the seniors. The gags that carried him to the heights of glory no longer worked anywhere else, but were received with gale-force laughter and applause, like masterpieces on a museum wall.

Good afternoon, people, if I can call you that. . . . You all look like you just came back from a funeral—your own. . . . You, sir, the gentleman in the third row massaging his gums. I hear you're so old your birth certificate is on a rock. Tell me, is it true you were circumcised with a stone knife? You're finally at the age where you can go to a topless bar and look at the menu?

Bada-boom.

The sound of a drummer's rim shot, homage to the hoary punch line on his snare.

One after the next.

Bada-boom. Bada-boom. Bada-boom.

And you, madam, I hear your husband makes love to you almost every day of the week. Almost Monday, almost Tuesday, almost Wednesday . . .

Bada-boom.

You could almost hear the rim shots in the beats between jokes, as Jackie poured out one after the next rat-a-tat fashion, his timing impeccable, every gear greased through more than half a century of working the material. And once in a while if they didn't laugh, when a one-liner fell flatter than a dime, he was also prepared for that.

People, if I could remember what came after 'abra,' I'd make you all disappear.

Bada-boom.

Jackie used an unlit cigar the length of a baton to orchestrate his stand-up routine, a trick he stole from George Burns, working the stogie between his hand and his mouth, sucking on it until his internal radar said he'd drained all the laughter from the one-liner or to give his audience brief relief before switching to another subject. His gag file was thicker than Berle's, ran a close second to Bob Hope's, and he could deliver the goods all day and all night without once repeating himself.

He was toying with the cigar now, marching into Ye Jesters as the antique cuckoo clock above the reception desk cuckooed three, a commanding general trailed after by his army of one, which happened to be the white-haired, stoop-shouldered Mugsy Charleson. Mugsy, his usual portrait in dishevelment, wore another dated suit that looked snatched off the discount rack at a Salvation Army thrift shop.

Jackie walked the worn carpet to the archway entrance to the main dining room, where he paused to survey the lunchtime crowd. Two or three tables of actors with nowhere to go. More regulars bunched at the bar, nursing the cheap stuff and talking

ancient memories and credits to take the stain off the current occupation for most of them—unemployment.

At least he was not the only one caught in the quicksand of oblivion, Jackie thought, smiling at the truth about misery loving company while acknowledging several nods and silent greetings with an airy wave on the way to his booth. In the long, narrow rectangle of a room, paneled walls were covered with portraits of Jesters and the greasy residue of "Jesters Revels" dinners that for years had filled the tables wall-to-wall with the major names of show business, most of them dead now—like Jackie's career. Which is why he had asked Augie Fowler to join him here today, telling him, "It's a matter of life and death, my dear old friend."

"Sweetheart, I hope I haven't kept you waiting long," Jackie said, settling across from Augie in the booth at the far end of the dining room, just left of the small stage hiding behind the faded crimson curtain. Mugsy Charleson sat between them so that he could have a commanding view of the dining room, and quickly spot anybody wandering in who might be important enough to tip off his boss.

"Do you really care, Jackie?"

"Of course not," Jackie said, and they shared a laugh. "I'd have been surprised if you were late, Augie—same as I was when wife number three broke the news she was."

"Number four," Mugsy Charleson said, checking the tablecloth, smoothing out some creases. "And not yet your wife."

"Her name again?"

"Serena. Not your kid, either," Mugsy said. "Only you didn't know that until later, after you went ahead and eloped to Connecticut. Augie, you think he'd listen to me about that?"

"Does he ever listen to anyone, Mugsy?"

"My bookie," Jackie said. "He helped make me what I am today."

"Like the Liberty Bell," Mugsy said, rearranging the silver and flicking away some stray crumbs, his sandpaper voice drowning out the same words coming from Jackie.

Jackie buried his steel gray eyes inside two slits and growled. "What's with the punch line, Mugsy? You the star all of a sudden? That what I'm hearing? Getting in front of the star?"

"Sorry, Jackie. I apologize."

"You hear him with the punch line, Augie? Like he's the star all of a sudden."

"I said I'm sorry, Jackie."

"A sorry specimen is what you are, Mugsy." Jackie Mack dug out

a fresh cigar and pocket scissors from his cashmere sports jacket. "Last time I was at the track, Augie, I had some horse . . . The jockey kept a diary of the trip."

He threw a glance at Mugsy.

Mugsy rapped out a bada-boom on the table.

"Another race, Augie, I bet on a horse at ten-to-one. It came in at five-fifteen . . ."

Another tabletop bada-boom from Mugsy.

Jackie ran the clipped and tunneled cigar under his pug nose and exhaled his satisfaction, then settled it between his chunky lips, clamped it in place between teeth turned yellow and brown from aging and nicotine, and through his silence commanded Mugsy to a new action.

Mugsy pulled out a gold flame lighter and torched Jackie's cigar.

Jackie took a deep drag and shot a heavy blue cloud in Mugsy's face. "Good boy, Mugsy. Nice Mugsy." Turning back to Augie, he said, "You know how long this boy has been with me now?"

"Since TV. Your *Broadway Saturday Night Hour*. He wrote the opening theme song with you, for Rain Forest Cigars," Augie said.

Jackie sang in the off-key voice of his Professor Schmaltz character: "What's new tonight is what we got for you tonight . . ." He gave Mugsy another dose of smoke. "The boy here, maybe a word or two. I mean, what genius does it take to rhyme *cigar* with *so far*? But I felt for him. I gave him a share of the credit, something to take home and make him look like a hero in the eyes of his old lady—they were having serious problems. That so, Mugsy?"

Mugsy threw out a palm to go with a modest nod of agreement.

"Worked like magic, Augie, because the two of them are still together, though not as long as Mugsy and me. We first crossed paths in burlesque, where I learned a rope or three watching him, but no cement until after we met up again on the Main Stem. He had a lead in one of Leonard Sillman's throwaways right before *New Faces* of 1952, me one routine, at the old Alvin Theater on Fifty-second, what's now the Neil Simon. I stole the show from him, from everyone, even John Lynds. What made my rep and got my name up in lights the first time. I took Mugsy along for the ride after that, since we always got along one-on-one. What friends are for, and here we still are. Right, kid?"

Another nod from Mugsy.

The overhead speaker blared out, "Jackie Mack. Telephone call for you up front at the reception desk. Telephone call for Mr. Mack at the reception desk."

"Back in a few," Jackie said, easing out of the booth.

He sent them a sly wink and marched off.

Mugsy and Augie watched him go, then Mugsy observed, in a half whisper, "Jackie'll have no bigger fan while he lives. He had his life to live over again, he'd still fall in love with himself."

Augie snorted a laugh and gave Mugsy a pair of tabletop bada-booms. He said, "I can't believe he's still doing the Paging Jackie Mack phone bit."

"God forbid anybody in the joint doesn't know God is among us. Anytime Jackie looks in a mirror he takes a bow."

"Who'd he steal the bit from? Alan Mowbray, wasn't it?"

"Mowbray. Around the block at the old Masquers Club on North Orange, before Jackie established a beachhead here. Mowbray made it an automatic. Five minutes after arriving, the girl at the Masquers reception desk did her thing for that old ham. Jackie, in a flash of originality, pays off our girl to do the same after seven minutes."

"He's never going to acknowledge that you wrote the *Broadway Saturday Night Hour* theme song, is he, Mugsy?"

"Or the parts of his act he didn't lift from Berle or Buttons. Buddy Hackett. Henny Youngman. The double-talk shtick from Caesar. Give the man credit where credit is due, Augie. What I didn't create, Jackie Mack stole only from the best."

"Why have you stuck it out all these years?"

"Sometimes I think it's God punishing me for my sins. In this instance, I mean the genuine article."

"That's not an answer, Mugsy."

"It's the only one you're going to get from me," Mugsy said, giving Augie a nudge to signal Jackie was on his way back.

Jackie made himself comfortable and said, "Two hunters are in the woods. One of them stops suddenly, clutches his chest, gasps, and sinks to the ground. He doesn't appear to be breathing. The other hunter is panic stricken. He jumps for the car phone and dials 911. He screams, 'My friend, he's dead. What can I do?' The operator quiets him down and says, 'First thing, let's be sure he's dead.' Silence. Then a shot. Then the hunter back on the phone saying, 'Okay. Now what?'"

Augie smiled politely and Jackie pinned him with a frown.

"Jackie, please. I told you the gag wouldn't fly," Mugsy said.

"You didn't tell me Augie had lost his sense of humor, Mr. Know-It-Some. What is it, Augie? Something to do with the dress you're wearing?"

"A cassock, Jackie. It's a cassock."

"In mauve, an eye patch to match. Cute, but I gotta tell you—Dan Dailey had more style than you. If you've gone into the rag business, Augie, Ralph Lauren has nothing to fear." He made a crazy face.

Mugsy said, "C'mon, Jackie, you remember Augie left the newspaper to headline a church or something. Right, Augie?"

"Or something, Mugsy. Jackie, I don't think the 'matter of life and death' you claimed on the phone to get me here was whether I thought the joke about the hunters worked or not." He checked his watch.

Jackie's stare found a distant planet. His mind chased after it for a few moments, then grew somber studying the cigar he was now holding like a microphone. "I need your advice, Augie. Maybe even your help."

"I'm flattered, I think. How so?"

Jackie hesitated. Shook his head. Gestured for Mugsy to tell him.

Mugsy said, "You remember how many years ago, twenty maybe, you two met?"

"When I was covering crime for the *Daily*."

"And you had the smarts to weasel into Jackie's confidence after he was arrested on that phony-baloney trumped-up rape charge that could have done to him what it did to Fatty Arbuckle?"

"Who could forget? Jackie is finally called to the stand and asked his name. He says, 'Jackie Mack.' He's asked his profession. He says, 'I'm the greatest comedian in the world.' The attorney asks, 'How can you say that?' Jackie says, 'I'm under oath aren't I?'"

Jackie did a bada-boom on the table.

Mugsy said, "You dug deeper than anybody, got the dirt that helped clear Jackie, and won for yourself some big journalism prizes, the Pulitzer or something?"

Augie said, "Where's ancient history fit into this?"

"Right. Ancient history. Like Jackie's feeling now. Like he's ancient history."

Jackie filled his throat with a growl. He said, "The truth in fourteen words, Augie: Inside every older person is a younger person wondering what in the hell happened."

"What he means, he's been on the skids so long—"

"They should only make it an Olympic event and I'd win the gold medal."

"He's been on the skids so long, he's down to doing these cockamamie gigs for old people—retirement homes and boat cruises, nickel-and-dime stuff—in order to keep the act greased."

The once-in-a-while TV special, when the network or an academy wants to add some wrinkles to the bill—”

“And the Friars Club celebrity roasts, the Merry Olde Madness nights here at Ye Jesters,” Jackie said. “The turns that keep me in the public eye, in front of the industry. Remind the twelve year olds running the business that I still have my stuff and can do the kinds of guest shots they’re still passing out to Red, bless him.”

“Only lately, those gigs have gone kaput,” Mugsy said. “Jackie’s been exiled from the dais again and again. They tell him he’s old school and out of touch, that they have to go with the fresh faces, marquee names that can put tushes in all the seats the way Jackie once did.”

“And I still can,” Jackie said, his voice rising loud enough to draw attention from the regulars at the bar. “Damn it. I still can. I’ve spent the last five months building a new act, Augie. New jokes. Fresh material on the menu. Can’t-miss stuff. Right, Mugsy?”

“I couldn’t have done better if I’d done it for you,” Mugsy said.

“Of course not,” Jackie said.

Mugsy eye-mailed a telling glance to Augie and said, “What made Jackie think of you.” Augie’s gesture said he was still in the dark. “You remember how once before, after the trial, when you and Jackie were palling around some?”

“So?”

“Jackie wondering one night what he’d do for an encore, after the headlines faded away, and you quick as a wink told him to do a stunt that would land him in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. So, his next show at the Sands in Vegas, he runs his act non-stop twenty-seven hours, with not a repeat or a clinker in the bunch. That was also your idea. Headlines around the world, and twenty-some years later, he’s still in the *Guinness* book for the longest stand-up comedy performance in history.”

“I killed ’em,” Jackie said. “The customers lined up for hours to grab a seat, and I killed ’em every time the house turned over. It got me every television show. The cover of every magazine that counted. Doubled my price. You helped me make history, Augie. Now, how do we do it again? Get me in front of my public again. Put me over. *That’s* the matter of life and death I phoned about.”

Augie threw his good eye up to the ceiling to evade the despair and helplessness raging over Jackie’s face. He didn’t have the heart to tell him his memory had settled on the wrong man. It hadn’t been Augie who’d come up with the *Guinness Book of World Records* brainstorm. It had been Jackie’s press agent, Yogi “Yes Man” Yester, but Yogi was too scared of Jackie to run it up

the flagpole, fearing his client would erupt into one of those temper frenzies he was famous for and send him packing.

Yes Man appealed to Augie for help on the q.t., claiming credit only after the stunt worked and Jackie was on his way to being enshrined in *Guinness*. Only Jackie didn't believe him and fired Yes Man, telling him, "Stealing another man's thunder, you get what you deserve."

Mugsy must have been reading Augie's mind, because he begged his attention with a pat on the thigh and a twist of the head that barely registered. He said, "Anyone can do it, Jackie knows you're him, Augie."

Augie found a spider working a web on one of the crusted chandeliers.

Jackie said, "Leave the man alone, dummy. Can't you see he's thinking?" He moved a fresh cigar to his mouth and waited for Mugsy to apply the flame lighter.

After about five minutes, the trace of a smile began forming on Augie's mouth. Within seconds it became a grin, then a smirk. He said, "The eleven o'clock number."

Jackie looked at Mugsy, then back at Augie. "Say again?"

"The solution to your problem, Jackie. The eleven o'clock number. Don't tell me you've forgotten what the eleven o'clock number is." He showered him with disbelief.

Jackie volleyed back a look suggesting he'd just heard blasphemy akin to breaking all Ten Commandments at once and said, "What do you think, Mugsy? Next he'll want to teach me stage left from stage right?"

The eleven o'clock number.

Jackie Mack knew what Augie meant the moment he said it.

The eleven o'clock number.

A staple of the Broadway musical, a grab-you-by-the-throat, foot-stomping, show-stopping, wake-up-any-sleepyheads wowser of a rouser that comes late in the show, but Augie wasn't talking about a musical number now; not at all what he was saying.

Augie meant he had to do something to make headlines around the world—the way the rape trial had made the headlines, the way the twenty-seven-hour stand at the Sands had made headlines—something to bring all of them flocking to him, standing in line hat in hand to beg him to do their shows. Put Jackie Mack back where he belonged, back on top.

Jackie Mack, the Clown Prince of Comedy, back in the big time, only now—

Jackie Mack, the undisputed King of Comedy.

Except—

Augie hadn't suggested an eleven o'clock number *before* he shared a hug and a handshake and left Ye Jesters Club, telling him, "It's something you'll have to come up with yourself, Jackie. Who to do it better than you?"

"Right, Augie, of course," he'd said, not willing to quit his ego any more than he had already.

A week went by.

Then another.

Another Friars roast where he wasn't invited to sit on the dais.

Into the fifth week, Mugsy said, "Jackie, I've been thinking—"

When Mugsy had finished explaining his idea for the eleven o'clock number, Jackie had to admit it was perfect, almost brilliant.

Nothing he'd admit to Mugsy, of course.

Mugsy was not being paid all these years to be brilliant.

He was being paid to make Jackie Mack look brilliant.

Jackie said, "Why I didn't see it for myself, Mugsy? An idea so simple only a simpleton would see it."

Mugsy had spelled it out to Jackie the day after the gym attendant, Gut Buster Browne, found Roscoe Wonderman dead in Ye Jesters' Nappy Nook, the lounge where members settled down for a snooze after their steam or sauna. Roscoe, an old character comic whose face was better known than his name, had dozed off for keeps, but it went unnoticed for seven hours, until Gut Buster realized he had not been hearing Roscoe's infamous "Snore That Woke Helen Keller."

"Confess," Mugsy suggested.

"Say again?" Jackie said.

"You phone Augie and tell him you murdered Roscoe. You caught Roscoe alone in the Nappy Nook. You took a pillow and smothered the life out of him."

"Why would I do a crazy thing like that?"

"Augie still has friends at the newspapers, like that columnist Gulliver. Give it to him exclusive. Front page of the *Daily* and that gets the ball rolling. Your eleven o'clock number. You see the headlines it's making already, even though Roscoe was only an also-ran. Imagine the media circus when the legendary Jackie Mack admits to the crime."

"Dummy, I mean I'd need a reason for giving the hook to that sorry excuse for a funnyman. Especially compared to me, Roscoe's ad-libs were never worth the paper they were written on."

"How about, he did the Friars' roast and not you? He gloated about it. Came over to you at this very booth and stuck his puss in yours and said, *You had your day, Jackie, baby. Now it's my turn in the spotlight.*"

"He didn't have pits in his pants would ever allow him to talk that way to me."

"Jackie, you're creating here, remember? Lyrics for your eleven o'clock number."

Jackie slammed the table, rattling his coffee cup. "Right, damn it. That S.O.B. had it coming to him. . . ." He gave Mugsy a *come on* gesture. "More. You have my attention."

"The final straw, when you picked up *Variety* and saw in Army's column Roscoe was being signed for the role you wanted in Ronnie Howard's next, *The Tin Man Meets the Thin Man.*"

"Ungrateful brat. I did six *Mayberry R.F.D.*'s with Andy and him, and he wouldn't even take a meeting."

"You never told me that, Jackie."

"Lyrics, stupid. Remember? I'm playing back fresh lyrics. You ever know a faster study than me?"

Mugsy fed him a smile. "So, you going to call Augie?"

"No."

"No?"

"First, how do you think I'm going to get out of it once I'm in up to my nose job?"

Mugsy tapped his chest.

"Meaning?"

"I confess," Mugsy said

"Say again? You—?"

"At the right time, when the eleven o'clock number needs a second chorus. My turn to call Augie. Admit I did the deed and I let you take the blame when you insisted, only you've been too good for me for too long to let you go the whole nine yards."

"I never understood what that meant, the whole nine yards."

"Go the distance."

"That makes it the whole ten yards. . . . You'd do that for me, Mugsy? Trade places in the frying pan?"

"The whole ten yards. It hasn't been the same for me since Sylvia died—"

"She did? When?"

"Two and a half years ago. You couldn't make the funeral, but you sent a wreath."

"Sounds familiar. Condolences."

"Aside from lonely without her, it's the stomach cancer that's

been eating away at me the past year. Less than a year left on the meter, you want to believe my doctor."

"You just getting around to telling me?"

"Didn't want to upset you."

"What Louie Ruscio kicked from, middle of his turn in one of Norbert Aleman's showrooms at the Riviera. Remember, Norbert called in a mild panic and I finished the date for him?"

"I remember."

"So, you step up to the mike and confess to killing Roscoe. What then?"

"You're off the hook, but not out of the headlines. Straight through the trial, I live so long, and whatever happens after that."

Jackie said, "I think there's a movie in this." He plugged his mouth with a cigar and waited for Mugsy to come up with the lighter.

Two years later, the first industry screening of *The Eleven O'Clock Number* filled the Television Academy's theater in North Hollywood with members and the media and won their roaring approval, particularly the performances of Sid Caesar as Jackie Mack, Red Buttons as Roscoe Wonderman, and Mugsy Charleson playing himself.

Talk of Emmy nominations was rampant along the buffet lines in the lobby and outside in the forecourt, where nicotine polluted the sky and overpowered the smell of burgers and beans on the barbecues, and hordes of paparazzi stalking famous faces in the crowd outnumbered the sculptures of stars who'd been voted into the Academy Hall of Fame.

Mugsy, in a sleek Armani suit and camouflage tie, was taking his congratulations by Jackie's bust, positioned about halfway between the likenesses of Sid Caesar and Milton Berle, breaking off animated conversations to do hug-and-kiss routines with Sid and Red, dozens of cronies from Ye Jesters Club, and glamour faces he knew only from the TV and supermarket tabloids.

Augie Fowler, breathing in the scene from a short distance away, seized a break in Mugsy's circle of well-wishers to step over. "I was hoping you'd show," Mugsy said. He shook Augie's hand like he was pumping well water, followed up with a bear hug and air kisses. "I owe tonight, all of this, everything to you, Augie."

"To Jackie, more like it."

"You're the one who came up with the eleven o'clock number."

"For Jackie, not for you, Mugsy, but it did turn out to be yours—the minute Jackie went up on the stand and said he really didn't kill

Roscoe Wonderman, that it was a story you cooked up for him."

"Desperate words from a desperate man. More credit than he ever gave me for a gag. You know I'm the most loyal guy you ever met, Augie. It broke my heart to have to go up there and refute his testimony. Tell it to the jury the way he told me. How and why he set out to murder poor Roscoe."

Augie moved in closer. He checked over his shoulders to see if anyone was close enough to hear them. He lowered his voice. "Between us chickens, Mugsy. Did you lead Jackie down that garden path, the way Jackie kept insisting?"

Mugsy reared his head back, as if he had been insulted by an earthquake. "What's next, Augie? Are you also going to accuse me of killing Roscoe?" He'd been toying with a cigar. He popped it in his mouth and waited for someone to light it. 🐦

CONVERSATION WITH

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

Robert S. Levinson has worked as a show business reporter; as the proprietor of one of the world's largest independent PR companies focused on the music industry; and as a writer-producer of comedy, music, variety, and awards specials for television. He has drawn on his extensive entertainment experience for his series of mysteries featuring Neil Gulliver and Stevie Marriner, most recently Hot Paint (Forge, 2002). He has also published short stories that are tied to his series (such as the one in this issue), as well as a stand-alone thriller, Ask a Dead Man (Five Star, 2004).

AHMM: How has your experience informed your novels? What are the challenges of setting a novel in a high-glamour milieu?

RSL: My novels built around the adventures of newspaper columnist Neil Gulliver and his ex-wife, soap

opera sex queen Stevie Marriner, are an extension of those former lives and have given me greater personal satisfaction. What I observed and experienced firsthand makes it possible for me to juice up the reality in my fiction, creating a world that in many ways is more honest, revealing, and believable than what's presented as the truth in non-fiction works, where the author relies on publicity-generated drivel of past decades that time has remade as truth or on facts spoon-fed them by ego-driven celebrities out to dress up their images and reinvent themselves for history.

AHMM: Your mysteries have revolved around the legacies of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, John Lennon, James Dean, and Andy Warhol. What are the challenges of building plots around such iconic figures?

RSL: There's always the risk of alienating readers, who approach the series with a preconceived notion of these legendary figures, their iconic images set in stone.

That I knew Elvis, John, and Andy, had friends in common with Monroe and Dean, and can present a unique kind of verisimilitude isn't necessarily acceptable to their most die-hard fans, who are quick to condemn me in e-mails to my Web site (www.robertslevinson.com).

Building these novels on foundations of truth—working in and around legitimate events, dates, and places—presents another challenge. With Elvis and Marilyn, it was off the reality that both worked on the 20th Century Fox movie lot at the same time. With Dean, the truth that so many of his co-stars and friends died under strange circumstances. With John, the tragedy of his assassination. With Andy, art and celebrity world connections we shared.

AHMM: What sorts of expectations do you find readers bring to books about such figures?

RSL: I suspect they want reassurance about their beliefs as much as they hope to learn something new that will underscore their allegiance to the icons. I've always written to this notion, maybe exposing some warts and pimples along the way, but never with any intent to knock their heroes off their pedestals. However, the simple notion of Elvis and Marilyn sharing the sack was enough to turn one El fan ballistic on me, while a Monroe buff e-mailed me his appreciation for confirming something he always knew in his heart. Go figure . . .

AHMM: Augie Fowler, a character in the story in this issue, has a

special role in the series. Can you explain him and talk about what appeals to you about him?

RSL: Augie is an imperfect septuagenarian, whose intelligence, compassion, loyalty, and late-in-life decision to seek a higher spirituality more than make up for his myriad character flaws. He's one of those rare "been-there-done-that" types who, in fact, has been there and done that. He left a moderately successful life in show business to become an award-winning crime reporter before personal tragedy led him to found an unconventional religious order. He knows and has access to almost everyone, which regularly proves of great value to Gulliver, with whom he shares a dysfunctional father-son relationship.

If I hadn't fathered Augie I'd be envious of the author who did, which is one reason I used him in "The Eleven O'Clock Number," will probably bring him back in new short stories, and hope to one day yank Augie away from Neil and Stevie and into a novel or two of his own.

AHMM: What are you working on right now?

RSL: I'm putting the finishing touches on another stand-alone thriller, and then may turn to a new *Affair* for Neil and Stevie. I'm also making time for short stories with themes that let me stretch as a writer, hoping that one day there'll be enough of them to inspire publishing interest in a collection. Meanwhile, I've put on permanent hold my next attempt to conquer Everest.

THE CURSE OF THE FIGURE FLINGER

KATHY LYNN EMERSON

Among the merchants of London in the year 1585—a year heralded by prophecies of doom on a scale not seen since old King Henry died—there lived a wadwife who called herself Mistress Fitt. I doubt it was her real name any more than Dame Starkey, the one I go by, is mine. Reputed to be a rich man's widow, she used her inheritance to become more wealthy still. Through connivance, she loaned out money at a rate forbidden by law. Some would say she reaped the reward she deserved.

In other words, one fine spring day she was murdered.

Now the law of England is a peculiar entity. At times it works, but at others . . . well, then there is a need to find out the truth by other means.

I am a figure flinger. For most of the sixty years I have been on this earth, I have made my living finding lost objects and charting the future in the stars. In truth, those are no more than clever tricks learned at my father's knee. If I'd been an able prognosticator I would have seen the constable coming in time to avoid both him and his questions.

Caught in my garret chamber, I assumed I was being sued . . . again. Londoners go to court at the drop of a hat. If flight would not serve, I reasoned, a bribe would have to do to keep me from arrest. I grimaced at the thought, but there seemed no help for it. When Constable Timmins, a bold youth with a shock of yellow hair, asked when I'd last seen Mistress Fitt, I made the mistake of assuming he asked because she'd brought suit against me for fraud.



"Yester e'en," I replied, honest for a change.

"When you cursed her soundly and threatened her with bodily harm if she pursued her charges against you?"

Foolish enough to grin at the memory, I nodded. There had been other shouting matches between us and I anticipated there would be more. Penelope Fitt had always been a most disagreeable person.

"Dame Starkey," the constable said, "you must come with me."

"Now, Timmons. I have no time for this. Go back and tell Mistress Fitt I will draw up a new horoscope to replace the one she does not like." I was reaching into my purse for something to encourage his cooperation when he laid hands on me.

"You are under arrest for murder, Dame Starkey. Mistress Fitt is dead."

London's gaols are none of them pleasant. I'd been in Ludgate before, for debt, but felons are taken to Newgate, the worst of the lot. All that saved me from being thrown in the darkest, deepest hole in the place, a dungeon called "the Limboes" that is lit only by a single candle set on a black stone, is the fact that I am a woman. Female prisoners at Newgate are kept in a single stone tower.

A generous bribe assured me of a private cell with a bedstead, warm blankets, and a charcoal brazier—it is cold even in spring behind the stone walls of a prison. Once I'd paid for these "luxuries" and for food to be brought on a regular basis, the heavy door slammed shut with a solid thunk and the key rasped in the lock, leaving me alone with my whirling thoughts.

The prognosis was not good. I did not have unlimited funds. I'd already had to pay an exorbitant admission fee in addition to the rental and expenses for this "special apartment." I'd also given the keeper five pounds for "exemption from ironing." Well worth it, I suppose. Otherwise manacles at my wrists, or fetters or shackles on my ankles, or perhaps an iron collar around my neck, would be chained to the ring in the middle of my floor.

I anticipated daily expenses would continue to mount as long as I was held in Newgate. I'd even be charged a fee for washing water. That commodity flowed freely into the prison through leaden pipes, but the person who brought it to my cell would have to be paid.

When my money ran out, I'd be sent to the common side. There I'd still have to find a way to buy food. In addition, the prisoners themselves collect garnish to finance the occasional evening of drunken debauchery. Those who refuse to donate to the cause have been known to end up naked and shivering, their very

clothes confiscated to make up for their lack of contribution.

It did not take me long to reach a conclusion—I needs must discover who killed Mistress Fitt. The only other way out of this place required doing the hempen jig at Tyburn.

After some thought, I sent a carefully worded note, containing just the hint of a threat, to someone who owed me a very great favor.

Nicholas Baldwin, prosperous merchant of London, stormed into my cell just as I was about to partake of a simple repast, exorbitantly priced, consisting of rye bread, porridge, and cheese.

"I see, Griselda," he said, "that you have at last met the fate you so richly deserve."

I winced at his use of my real name. I hadn't thought of myself as Griselda Ferrers in years. "Good day to you, Nick. So kind of you to visit."

In the twelve years we'd known each other, Nick had never approved of the way I earn my living, but that he'd turned up at all meant he intended to help me. Otherwise, he'd have ignored my letter and left me to rot.

In a cause as good as saving my own skin, I was willing to endure a certain amount of preaching. I continued to munch on the bread as he surveyed my cell. All the luxury I'd paid for was revealed by candles a cellarman sold for twice what they cost outside Newgate.

"I suppose you want money," Nick said when he'd completed his inspection.

His nose wrinkled in distaste as he spoke. Small wonder! The two large angular stone towers of the old Roman gate at Newgate straddle a broad market street that is dominated, just inside the city walls, by the Shambles. This long row of butchers' stalls extending toward Cheap accounts for Newgate's nickname, "the Stink," and for the pervasive odor that infects the entire prison.

"I can earn my own coin," I snapped. "There's always some fool ready to pay for a glimpse of his future, even in prison."

He snorted. "How long will that last? You're trapped here. If someone decides you're a fraud, if your prediction doesn't turn out the way you promised, your victim will know right where to find you."

"I suppose you think there's poetic justice in that?"

"Delicious irony at the least," he replied. "I have been told it was because of a horoscope you devised for Mistress Fitt that she intended to take you to court."

"She claimed the prognostication was all untrue."

"And that's the reason the authorities think you killed her?"

I took heart from his choice of words. "There's more," I admitted. "I confronted her. Cursed her, in fact. And naturally insisted, in a loud and carrying voice, that every word in her star chart was gospel."

"And so you were arrested for her murder when she turned up dead the next morning."

"It seems I was the last person to see her alive, saving only the one who killed her."

"Not you?"

"No. Not I. I do not even know how she died, since I was not present at the inquest."

"She was drowned," Nick said.

I could not contain my surprise, and it was that reaction, I do think, that convinced him I was innocent.

"Someone pushed her face into a basin of water and held it there."

I shuddered and muttered, "I knew this was not destined to be a good year."

There had been that partial eclipse on the nineteenth—the day before I quarreled with Mistress Fitt. Now that was a warning of disaster I should have heeded, even if I'd chosen to discount the malevolent conjunctions shown by the planets and the disturbing signs revealed by the moon.

Nick sat down beside me on the low camp bed. "Easter term begins in less than a week. They'll try you at the Sessions House in Old Bailey Street."

"I know." The quarter sessions were held hard by Newgate, convenient for transporting prisoners.

"Trial to execution is generally only a matter of days, and it is a rare trial indeed that lasts more than a quarter of an hour."

"If I could just get out of this place, I am certain I could discover who really did kill Mistress Fitt. It was likely one of her clients, someone who defaulted on a loan, or was about to."

After a long, contemplative silence, he said, "There is one way you can leave Newgate. The authorities will let you out on furlough, so long as you pay the wages of a guard."

"More expenses," I grumbled.

Nick almost smiled. "And not yet the end of them. Even if you manage to prove your innocence, you will have to return to Newgate to await the grace of the Queen. Another two months may pass before a royal pardon arrives. And then, to add insult to injury, you'll be charged a release fee."

"Only if I'm alive to pay it."

"At least there's no lawyer involved. None is permitted in a criminal case."

"Small mercy," I agreed. Even moneylenders and fortunetellers, in my experience, are more honest than the average man of law.

Nick went off to speak to the keeper of Newgate. When he returned a few hours later, he was accompanied by a man of about my own years. This fellow, Bates by name, was short and brick shaped, but he had the biggest head I'd ever seen on a man. An unkempt gray beard and lank hair cut just below his ears exaggerated its size and only partly concealed the pockmarks that mottled an otherwise plain face. Dark, deep-set eyes regarded me with a blank stare.

"You're not allowed to leave London," he said.

"Why would anyone want to?" I replied. I'd been born within the sound of Bow-bell and had never felt any desire to travel farther beyond the city walls than Westminster or Southwark.

Bates slanted his eyes toward Nick. "Had a prisoner once who went all the way to Lancashire on her furlough," he said. "Turned out she was innocent, though."

"As I am," I assured him.

"So say they all."

The stench of the Shambles and a profusion of sights and sounds engulfed us the moment we left Newgate.

"Ass's milk! Two shillings a pint!" a boy cried, offering up his product for inspection.

A porter with a trunk on his back pushed past without apology, nearly shoving me into the path of a lady carried in a chair. For a moment she looked alarmed, but she was quickly transported out of harm's way by her two sturdy chairmen. There were horses in the street as well, and a few coaches. These awkward vehicles had proliferated in the past few years to the point of causing traffic jams on the narrower thoroughfares.

I reveled in every bit of the confusion, delighted to be free again.

"It is clear you do not intend to return to your lodgings just yet," Nick remarked when we'd passed several streets leading toward the Thames without turning south. "What is your plan?"

"Penelope Fitt did business through an agent," I told him. "One Hornsby. He styles himself a scrivener." He'd arranged loans for her, drawn up the bonds, and shared in the profits.

As we walked, I thought over what I knew of Mistress Fitt's sharp practices. By law, interest on loans is limited to ten percent per annum. A typical bond for £100 might say that the borrower would pay the lender's agent £105 in six months' time. Mistress Fitt got around the law by falsifying the amount of the loan. Her bond would say the borrower owed £200, and therefore twice as much in interest. It was naught but a convenient fiction . . . as long as the borrower repaid the £100, with interest, within six months. If he defaulted on the loan, the bond became enforceable . . . for the higher amount. Mistress Fitt had never hesitated to proceed against such deadbeats at the common law, or to settle out of court when she got a good offer. She'd made an excellent living from penalties alone.

Such a one as she made enemies.

One of them must have killed her.

We walked as far as the city cross while I was ruminating. It is a small, highly decorated stone tower set upon stone steps. A few years back, religious vandals destroyed the lower figures, sculptured scenes from the life of Christ. They even removed the Christ child from His mother's arms.

"The bonding of borrowers to lenders is a flourishing business in London," I said, "and the center of the industry is that church." I gestured toward an impressive edifice on the south side of Cheap, bracketed by Hosier Lane and Cordwainer Street. Just beyond stood the Conduit, surrounded by groceries and apothecary shops. I fancied I could smell the spices even this far away.

Nick stood aside to let pass two water carriers burdened by wooden containers that looked more like butter churns than barrels. Then he bade me farewell and Godspeed. As he walked away, bound for his lodgings and warehouse in Billingsgate, I almost called him back. The Court of Common Pleas would have records if Mistress Fitt had begun litigation against someone who'd defaulted on a loan. They'd need bribing to release information on civil suits arising from nonpayment of debts.

With a sigh, I let him go. Nick had already done more than I'd expected on my behalf. The last thing I wanted was to feel indebted to him.

So, I was on my own . . . except for Bates. I gave my warder a baleful look. I did not need to consult the stars to predict he would be more hindrance to me than help.

The vaults beneath St. Mary Le Bow have long been the principal meeting place for brokers, moneylenders' agents, and clerks

who specialize in drawing up bonds. It was no great feat to locate my quarry there. Hornsby wanted borrowers to find him and made himself easy to spot by wearing a brightly colored doublet and a bonnet with a large, drooping feather. He'd just finished signing papers with a nervous little man in country clothes when I accosted him.

"There you are, Hornsby," I declared in a loud, carrying voice. "Just as I foresaw!"

He turned, a cheerful smile on his cherubic face. It faltered only slightly when he recognized me. The bushy brows over his bright blue eyes lifted in an unspoken question. Since he had been Mistress Fitt's tenant as well as her agent, he'd undoubtedly heard I had been arrested for her murder.

"I have read the stars," I informed him, "and they told me to come to you for answers."

His normally ruddy complexion paled a bit at that, but he recovered himself with alacrity. "What can I do to serve you, Dame Starkey?"

"You can help me find the real culprit before they hang me for something I did not do. I need names—all those who defaulted on loans from Mistress Fitt and were about to be sued, and all those from whom she cozened larger penalties than she ought to have been due."

"You think one of them killed her?"

"Have you any better suggestion?" I gave him the look I'd practiced on countless clients, the one that convinced them I could unleash the dark forces of the occult should I choose to do so.

Hornsby lost no time taking me aside, into a secluded area in the crypt of St. Mary Le Bow where we were not likely to be overheard. His account of Mistress Fitt's recent business dealings yielded two names worth investigating.

Weems the weaver had defaulted on a loan of five pounds. I knew him. He had a quick temper and a chronic shortage of funds.

Then there was Mistress Gamage of Soper Lane, who apparently had a problem with gambling. She had failed to repay the somewhat greater sum of seventy-five pounds. If Mistress Fitt had sued, Master Gamage would have learned what his wife had been up to. He had, Hornsby told me, a reputation as a pinchpenny.

"No one else?"

"No one. And chances are Mistress Gamage would have repaid before the case came to court. She always has before. I fear, dear madam, that you were the only one who threatened Mistress

Fitt. I heard you myself, cursing her. Some might say the curse of a figure flinger alone is enough to kill."

"Faugh! I am no witch, Hornsby. And you know full well I left her hale and hearty."

Bates cleared his throat. I had almost forgot he was there, but when he spoke, I found myself regarding him with new interest.

"It was you that found her, was it not?" he asked Hornsby. "Being her tenant. And you that told the coroner about the curse?"

One look at Hornsby's face was answer enough. "Villain!" I cried, rounding on him. "How dare you accuse me of such a heinous crime!"

"I made no accusation," he babbled. "I meant you no harm! I did but tell them what I knew."

I conquered a compelling urge to strike him and settled for the most formidable glower I could produce. When he once again seemed suitably cowed, I peppered him with more questions. By the time I was done, he'd not only provided me with every detail he could remember of his discovery of Mistress Fitt's body, but had also agreed to let me search her house. She had left everything she owned to endow the grammar school associated with St. Mary Le Bow, but Hornsby was executor of her will.

"Well," I said to Bates as we set off for St. Helen's, Bishopgate, where Mistress Fitt had lived for many years, "that went well."

"I wonder why he was so cooperative?"

"He's afraid of me. Some people do fear fortunetellers. At times, 'tis passing convenient."

That reminded me that I'd intended to give Bates the slip once I got out of Newgate. So far, he'd stuck to me like a burr.

"My father was an astrologer," I said. Not a very good one, but I saw no reason to add that, or to tell him that my mother, a gentlewoman, had abandoned us when I was a baby. "I learned my craft at his knee. This is a bad year for any man who has journeys to make by land or water. Violence frowns upon travelers." That came straight from Master Porter's almanac.

"Good reason to stay in London," Bates said.

"Even a short journey of a few streets can be dangerous," I intoned. "Where do you lodge, Bates?"

"I rent a room from Mistress Clover in Cow Lane."

I permitted myself a small smile. Cow Lane was located in Faringdon Without, a ward on the west side of Smithfield. It was hard by Newgate but a goodly walk from my abode.

"I'll not be returning there until you are back in prison," Bates added.

"Do you mean to tell me I must house and feed you as well as pay your wages?"

Bates gave a negligent shrug. "That is what Nicholas Baldwin agreed to on your behalf."

"Pestilence and pestilent fevers will sweep cities and scour towns," I sputtered, too indignant to make sense.

"Perhaps they will," Bates said with equanimity, "but that does not change my duty."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I do not suppose you suffer from the French pox?"

Bates grinned, showing a great many big yellow teeth. "I am prodigious healthy and always have been. And particular what females I sport with."

Master Lloyd's almanac, which supported all the claims in Porter's, additionally warned that this would be a bad year for those with venereal diseases. No help there, it seemed. Also in danger were effeminate men. Certes, Bates did not fit into that category! Now that I looked more closely at him, I saw that, for his age, he was a fine figure of a man.

"I give up," I muttered as we reached Mistress Fitt's house. "For my sins, it seems I am to be cursed with your company." Touching my throat and imagining a noose cutting into it, I could only hope it was not to be for the rest of my life.

The key Hornsby had given me fit smoothly into the lock and we entered the quiet dwelling. The servants had been let go since Mistress Fitt's death and only her cat remained to greet us. A large, surly, gray and white-striped beast, he made a brief appearance, then vanished.

I gave the rooms on the lower floor only a cursory examination. Over the years the furnishings had changed, becoming more costly and more comfortable, but otherwise little had altered since the first time I'd visited these premises to pledge my best cloak in return for a loan.

I'd heard of Mistress Fitt by word of mouth and approached her privately. No agent had been involved. That is done sometimes among women, but is not always wise. Such private loans lack the protection of law.

The line between pawnbroker and moneylender is exceeding thin. Mrs. Fitt acted as both, as it suited her. Knowing that, although I meant to pursue the two names Hornsby had given me, I also wanted another look at something I'd noticed on my last visit, just before that fatal final quarrel.

A woman's gown of cloth of silver had been laid out in Mrs. Fitt's private chamber. When I'd remarked upon the workmanship and cost of the garment, she'd boasted that someone had just borrowed £600 from her, pledging not only the gown but a number of pieces of good jewelry. She'd shown me pearl and gold garnishings—earrings good for five hundred marks for themselves alone.

The gown had not been moved. Nor had anyone bothered to clean up the mess where Mistress Fitt had died. That stopped me for a moment. I could envision all too clearly her final struggles as someone held her face in that basin of water. She'd been a small woman, half my size. It would not have taken great strength to kill her, only cold-blooded determination.

The basin, Hornsby had said, had fallen next to her. Her face and hair had been soaked.

Squaring my shoulders, I set about searching the chamber for records of transactions. Penelope Fitt had been the sort to keep written accounts. She'd hide them, I thought, but in an easily accessible spot.

First I looked under the featherbed. Then I tried to find an uneven floorboard. Finally I surveyed the wainscotted walls hung with tapestry. I located the hidden panel behind the first hanging I lifted. It opened at a touch and proved to be stuffed full of record books. I removed only the one on top, the most recent.

Bates came to look over my shoulder when I opened it. "That does not look like regular writing," he observed.

I glanced at him, guessing from his expression that he could not read. It would not have done him any good had he possessed that skill. The records were in code.

Fortunately, I am familiar with all the tricks of secret writing. My father employed many codes and ciphers. Indeed, half the art of casting a horoscope is in using archaic symbols. I handed the volume to Bates.

"Make yourself useful. If you must follow me everywhere, carry this."

"Carry it where?"

"I am going home," I told him. "We'll decipher it there."

I expected some protest at this blatant theft, since he was an officer of the law, but Bates simply tucked the volume under his arm and opened the door for me.

I hesitated, looking back. Had anything else changed since my last visit to this room? Slowly I circled the chamber, eyeing the bed, the dress, and the plain wooden box containing the rest of the

pledge. I opened the latter and examined the contents—two great gold pieces and some gold buttons . . . but no earrings.

I live in a garret and have done for more than a dozen years. The premises, located in Bread Street just beyond the turn into Five Foot Lane, are broken into three tenements. Two are divided vertically so that both the compass maker and the pulley maker have a shop on the first floor with a parlor and kitchen behind and two chambers on the first floor. My garret, reached by a stair alongside the compass maker's shop, is the third lodging. It is a good location, save for its proximity to the fish wharf.

My front room is designed to give my clients what they expect. Black cloth covers the windows in the dormers so that there is no light in the room but what comes from a single candle and the coals glowing in the brazier. The furnishings consist of a large, black, curved-top storage chest and a long table covered with charts and the instruments for making them. Scattered about are rolls of parchment tied with velvet ribbon, an irregularly shaped black stone I use as a paperweight, a crystal ball, and several packs of colorfully painted cards.

The long academic robe that belonged to my father hangs on a peg in the corner. When I wear it with the hood pulled up to hide my face, it gives me an added aura of mystery, but for the most part I dress like any other female of the merchant class, in fabrics and fashions as rich and new as I can afford.

Bates's expression of distasté at the sight of my outer chamber changed to approval as soon as he entered the second room. There, where I live, light and color abound. I possess a fine, high, comfortable bed and even have a mirror.

I glanced into it as I passed and frowned. I do not see myself as that stout woman of indeterminate age. In my mind I am still a slender, healthy eighteen, ready to take on the world. I needed that self-confidence just then. Bates's very presence was a constant reminder of the dire fate that awaited me if I did not succeed in my quest to find Penelope Fitt's killer.

"I will go to a cookshop and buy two set meals," Bates offered, "if you will promise not to disappear while I'm gone."

I blinked at him in surprise. "You'd trust my word?"

He thought about it for a moment. "I trust your desire to clear your name. For that you must stay in London."

"Be off with you then. I'll study Mistress Fitt's record book while you're gone."

I tried every cipher I knew, but none revealed any comprehensible

text. I began to have the very bad feeling that this was the sort of code that depended upon a key.

"Why did the moneylender go to so much trouble?" Bates asked when he returned with ale, two meat pies, and a wedge of cheese.

It was a good question. A pity I had no answer.

We went to bed unsatisfied, I in my fine high bed and Bates on the floor of the outer room. I did not sleep well. Thoughts of what would happen to me if I did not find the real murderer kept me from my rest. When I did doze, I dreamed I was being prodded up the steps of a ladder, a noose around my neck. Once I reached the top, I was expected to jump off, hanging myself. If I did not, I'd be "turned off" by the executioner. What a choice!

In my nightmare, I was having none of it. I reversed direction, backing down the ladder until I stood on firm ground again and turned to face the hangman. I stared hard at him, trying to see who was behind the mask, but only the eyes showed. There was something familiar about them, but what?

I awoke disoriented and wondering if I had gone about everything backwards. I reached for the record book, said a brief prayer, and tried out the new theory I'd just formulated.

Read from right to left, every word Mistress Fitt had written backwards made sense. Simple, yes, but until I thought of it, a ruse that had successfully hidden the identity of the woman who'd pawned her gown and earrings.

Lady Dorothy lived in a grand London house when she was not at Queen Elizabeth's court. This mansion was only a short distance from Mistress Fitt's abode. As soon as it was late enough to pay a call, Bates and I made our way there and requested an audience. I was not surprised when we were at once ushered into a private parlor. I knew Lady Dorothy. Her last consultation with me, more than a year earlier, had been to inquire whether or not her husband would survive a sea journey. She'd seemed not at all loath to embrace widowhood, but my prognostication had been for a safe voyage and his eventual return, which had proved to be the case.

Gossip is a wonderful source of information. I've used it for years in formulating my predictions. I knew that Lady Dorothy was married to a very wealthy man who kept her on a short leash. Whether he knew she was addicted to wagering was anyone's guess. It was a common enough problem, witness the merchant's wife Hornsby had said Mistress Fitt was about to sue.

"I did not send for you," Lady Dorothy greeted me. "What do you want?"

"To ask you about your arrangement with Mistress Fitt."

The noblewoman's face went whiter than the powder she'd used.

"The pearl and gold garnishings are missing. Is that why you killed her? To get them back?" With Bates beside me, I felt safe making the bold accusation. It was my theory that the earrings had not been Lady Dorothy's to dispose of. Desperate to retrieve them, she'd paid a late night visit to the moneylender's house. When Mistress Fitt would not part with them, she'd taken them by force, and murdered the wadwife to cover up her crime.

Lady Dorothy's eyes had widened at my accusation. Speechless at first, she now began to sputter in indignation. "Nonsense. Arrant nonsense! If I'd done a thing so mad, do you not think I'd have taken back the rest of my possessions as well?"

She had a point. I sighed and conceded it. "Ah, well. 'Twas worth a try."

"How do you know my earrings are missing?" Lady Dorothy demanded.

"I searched Mistress Fitt's rooms, and I saw her record book."

"She kept records?" Lady Dorothy looked as if she'd just bitten into a sour grape.

"Aye. I'll destroy them if you like."

While we negotiated my fee for this service, a part of my mind continued to work on the matter of the missing earrings. Had Mistress Fitt surprised a thief in the middle of a robbery? That might explain why she'd been killed, but not the manner of her death. A common thief would have struck her and fled, or mayhap stabbed her. Or snapped her neck. But drowning? I could not picture it.

Bates and I went next to visit the two people Hornsby had named. Either they were both accomplished liars or neither knew anything about Mistress Fitt's murder. Weems the weaver claimed he'd had the money to repay his loan and his wife swore he'd never left her side the night of the murder. Mistress Gamage said she'd already confessed to her husband and been forgiven. He'd promised to make good her debt. When confronted, he confirmed her story.

"St. Winifred's wimple," I muttered as we left Soper Lane. "At this rate I'll be dead in a fortnight."

"Talk to Hornsby again," Bates suggested.

"Why are you so helpful?" For some reason, his sympathy irritated me.

"I like you, Dame Starkey." He blushed as he said it.

At a loss how to react to that, I kept walking, and my steps took me once again toward Mistress Fitt's house. "Hornsby was cooperative yesterday," I murmured.

Of a sudden, I wondered why.

"He found the body," Bates remarked in an undertone.

My steps faltered. Had Hornsby been in the house when she was murdered?

Had *he* murdered her?

"If he killed her, why help me?"

"Why not?" Bates countered as we resumed walking. "You have only a few days of freedom. Then you'll no longer be a threat to anyone. Why not send you off in the wrong direction? He gave you the names of clients who'd defaulted on their loans and were about to be sued. Clients who had nothing to do with Mistress Fitt's death."

I had difficulty imagining Hornsby turning on his longtime employer. He'd profited mightily from his association with her.

"How did he know she died by drowning?" Bates asked.

"Wet face and hair. So he said. But all that means is that he found her soon after she died." A spark of hope ignited as I turned to Bates. "When did Hornsby call in the watch? Is there any way you can find out? If her face and hair were still wet and it was morning, then I could not have killed her. Our quarrel was the previous evening."

"The local constable will not be hard to locate. I will find him and ask." Bates glanced at the nearest building. "You stay here and search Hornsby's chamber."

We had reached Mistress Fitt's house, and in my pocket I still had the key Hornsby had given me.

The scrivener had a goodly chamber, large and airy and as well furnished as Mistress Fitt's. That the door had been locked had deterred me not at all. Another of the skills my father taught me was how to pick locks.

I found the missing earrings within a quarter hour of starting my search. Hornsby was proved a thief. But was he also a murderer? Did he take the jewelry and kill to cover up his crime? Or did he kill first, then steal from the dead woman? Or, to be fair, did he simply palm the most valuable object in the room after he found his employer dead?

Pondering the possibilities, I continued my search, turning up a veritable treasure trove of documents in a padlocked chest. I car-

ried a handful to the window seat and made myself comfortable. It did not take long to realize two things. The first was that Mistress Fitt was not the only wadwife Hornsby had dealings with. The second was that he seemed to have kept bonds for a great many loans that had already come due. And been paid? The possibility intrigued me, for I well remembered something Mistress Fitt had recently complained of:

For all her conniving ways, Penelope Fitt had some scruples. She did not rob her clients. She did but cheat them a little.

What she'd told me was that one of her competitors had been accused of keeping bonds. When a borrower and his seconds sign such a document, the lender keeps possession of it, but only until the borrower pays his debt. This unscrupulous lender claimed to have lost a bond. A year later, when no one could quite recall the details of the loan, the bond turned up and the lender claimed the debt had never been repaid. The ensuing lawsuit demanded not only the original sum but also the penalty specified in the bond.

Had Hornsby been a party to a similar scheme? If he had and Mistress Fitt had discovered it, she'd have been furious. She'd have threatened him with the loss of his position as her agent and possibly with jail.

I realized I needed to get these papers to the authorities without further delay. Unfortunately, I also realized that I was no longer alone in the house. I heard a door slam and the sound of footfalls on the stairs, and then, before I could hide what I was reading, Hornsby himself appeared in the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" Fury made his eyes glitter with a dangerous light. He rushed across the chamber and snatched the papers out of my grasp.

The door, which had not latched behind him, swung partway open again. I caught sight of a flutter of movement on the far side. The possibility that it might be Bates returning brought me to my feet to face my foe. Voice steady, outward demeanor unruffled, I looked him right in the eyes and lied through my teeth.

"Lady Dorothy wants her earrings back." I held the glittering baubles out, jiggling them to catch the light. "I agreed to search for them. No doubt you did but store them here for safekeeping. Did you find them when you discovered her body?"

His anger faded, replaced by a calculating look.

The door creaked open the rest of the way, making us both jump, but it was only Mrs. Fitt's striped cat. It stalked into the room, sneered at me, twitched its tail, and went out again.

My heart was already in my throat and now it threatened to

lodge there permanently. It had been the cat I'd seen. No one was lurking nearby, listening to what we said, poised to rush in if Hornsby tried to kill me.

"Earrings," he repeated, taking them from my nerveless fingers. Then he glanced at the papers again.

I felt sick inside. When he looked up, his eyes were as cold and deadly as a viper's.

"You are a clever woman," Hornsby said. "Penelope Fitt always said so. Praised your good brain and excellent memory. You notice details, she said. I should have remembered that. But I did not know you could read."

"Only English," I blurted.

Some of the text of the bonds was in Latin. Would he believe I hadn't understood what the documents said?

Father used to say that being able to "read" people was even more important than deciphering the written word. It helped give them what they wanted to hear when they had their fortunes told. I had no trouble telling what Hornsby wanted. I was a threat to him. He wanted me dead.

I swallowed convulsively.

To my surprise, Hornsby stepped aside, clearing the way to the door. "Get out. You can prove nothing. By the time you come back with a constable, these papers will be naught but ashes. As for the earrings, they'll be back in Mistress Fitt's chamber. Your meddling will cost me profits I'd counted on, but I'll have the satisfaction of watching you hang for it."

His words sparked a deep resentment in me, and a sense that if I was to die anyway, there was little harm in provoking him further. "Did you kill her to keep her silent about those bonds?" I crossed my arms over my chest, prepared to wait as long as need be for an answer.

He hesitated, but the temptation to boast proved too great to resist. "She begrudged my earning an extra bit of profit on loans she'd made."

"You quarreled?"

"We did. She dismissed me and threatened me with the law. Then she turned her back on me, as if I was not even there, and began to wash her face."

I shivered, imagining what had happened next. "Villain!"

He laughed. "For killing her or for casting the blame on you? You made it easy, having quarreled with her the way you did. How could I not tell the authorities that you cursed her and swore revenge?"

"My curse on you will be far worse."

"I am not afraid of you, old woman. Neither your curses nor any accusations you may make against me will trouble me in the least. No one will believe your word against mine. I am a respected scrivener. You are naught but a wretched figure flinger."

I opened my mouth to condemn him to Hades, but I never got the chance. A familiar voice spoke from the doorway.

"They *will* believe me," Bates said, "especially with the good constable here to back me up." Behind him stood a man I did not know. He was armed with a cudgel and looked as if he hoped Hornsby would attempt to escape so that he could use it.

"I thought it was just the cat," I gasped.

Bates grinned at me. "The cat," he informed me, as Hornsby was taken into custody and led away, "was but a portent of good fortune to come." 🐈

Note to Our Readers:

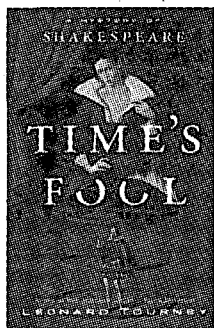
If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

There is a certain logic to having such keen observers of human nature as Shakespeare and Chaucer turn their skills to detection. These giants of English literature are hot properties in the world of mystery fiction as both supporting players and lead sleuths. Simon Hawke's *The Merchant of Vengeance*, for instance, is the fourth in a series that features a young Will Shakespeare. Edward Marston's Nicholas Bracewell series features a troupe of Elizabethan players. Phillip Gooden's Nick Revill series deals with Shakespeare's own company, and in *Mask of Night*, the fifth book in the series, Shakespeare lends a hand. Add to this list two recent titles, Philippa Morgan's *Chaucer and the House of Fame* and Leonard Tourney's *Time's Fool*, featuring a middle-aged Shakespeare.

As Shakespeare notes as he contemplates his predicament in Tourney's *TIME'S FOOL* (Forge, \$24.95), "If there was a common theme to my plays it was intrigue, deception, false seeming, the counterfeit smile, the feigned good wish. Even when there was no murder there was deceit. . . . Was not this then familiar ground to me? Was I not a forester in this thicket?"



Thus does Shakespeare encourage himself when it appears that some enemy is intent on destroying him one way or another. Tourney begins his tale in 1603 when the plague has closed the theaters of London and Will receives a missive from his former mistress, the dark mistress immortalized in his poetry, imploring him to come to her. He does and she importunes him to aid her. He refuses, and then her house is engulfed in one of the city's frequent fires. Will barely escapes. She is not so fortunate.

This incident is the first overt indication that Will is a target, but others foreshadowed it, and even more blatant actions follow. After more near-escapes, a worried Will is persuaded to leave London and seek safety in Stratford, but outdistancing his enemy is not so simple.

Tourney does an excellent job of weaving Shakespeare's completed works, and works yet to come, into the story in all sorts of ways. He even goes so far as to have Shakespeare don a disguise and assume the guise of Shylock during an attempts to outwit his enemies. Tourney, who also wires the Matthew and Joan Stock series of Elizabethan mysteries, is intimately acquainted with the period and the historical

details are rich whether he is describing the labor of travel or historical personages or the life of a player in Shakespeare's troupe. It seems safe to bet that Shakespeare as sleuth will never achieve the success of Shakespeare as writer, but Tourney makes a good attempt that should please fans of the Bard as well as fans of historical mysteries.

Philippa Morgan's *CHAUCEr AND THE HOUSE OF FAME* (Carroll & Graf, \$25) is billed as a first novel; but more accurately it is Philip Gooden's first book writing as Philippa Morgan. In it he introduces the reader to Chaucer the former soldier turned poet, who now serves as a diplomatic courier on a secret mission for John of Gaunt. It is interesting to note that Chaucer and Shakespeare share traits other than those of a literary kind. In Tourney and Morgan's books they are both long-distance husbands separated from wives and children. Both have other romantic entanglements and both have a wary foot set in the worldly realm of royal favor.



The year is 1370 and Chaucer is entrusted with the delicate job of returning to France with a sealed letter for Henri, Comte de Guyac, who had been Chaucer's host and jailer when he was a prisoner held for ransom years earlier. Chaucer's charge is to persuade Henri to continue to support the English cause in Aquitaine, and failing that, to deliver the letter as a last resort. The allure of returning to Guyac is enhanced by thoughts of Henri's wife, Rosamond, for whom Chaucer still harbors feelings. From the start, the reader knows the journey will be hazardous as a previous messenger has been waylaid and brutally murdered. Indeed, even though Chaucer is accompanied by two young men employed to provide him some measure of protection the journey proves arduous and full of unexpected dangers as an assassin stalks the travelers. Like Tourney, Morgan not only integrates historical events and personages into the story line, but also foreshadows Chaucer's most famous work. Chaucer meets with a troupe of traveling players who play an important role in this story; Chaucer becomes a storyteller to his companions on the journey to amuse and entertain them; and Chaucer muses on a caravan of pilgrims and imagines himself making his own pilgrimage on his return to England.

The ubiquitous assassin stalking Chaucer throughout the book is more convenient than convincing, but otherwise Morgan's tale is an entertaining imaging of Chaucer's middle years as he gathered the observations and experiences that he would transmute into the gold of *The Canterbury Tales*.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: PointBlank Press, an imprint of Wildside Press, comes out with an anthology of Rob Kantner's Ben Perkins stories, *TROUBLE IS WHAT I DO*, this fall; J. A. Konrath wrote the introduction.

THE OPEN TILL

DAVID BRALY

When he saw the red Lexus, Randall Hoskins was walking down Biscayne Boulevard, wondering how he would pay the month's rent. The shiny new red Lexus rolled right past him. First he noticed the car, then the driver. And that's when he had one of those cases of sudden enlightenment when something previously unsuspected instantly becomes as clear as a yellow streak on black glass.

A shiver went down his spine.

Perhaps he wouldn't have done anything but let the future happen the way it always seems to in its inevitable manner if the Lexus hadn't turned off the street and into the parking lot of one of Miami's better restaurants only a block away. The proximity invited action. At that moment, for no particular reason that day more than any other day, pure unadulterated initiative, of the sort seldom shown by Hoskins of late, took over.

Without pausing to mull it over, he hurried to the nearby crosswalk, jogged to the other side of Biscayne, and rushed to the front of the restaurant. He managed to arrive at its doors at the same instant as the driver of the Lexus. And then he managed to act surprised.

"Petel!" he said. "Peter Larsen! I haven't seen you in a coon's age."

Pete Larsen, a stocky young man with a low brow above a pug nose that supported thick glasses, was dressed that day in a dull gray suit. He came to an abrupt halt. His widened eyes and open mouth showed his surprise at seeing Hoskins; the whole demeanor of his face and body announced that the encounter wasn't a pleasant one. But Larsen tried gamely to act pleased.

"Mr. Hoskins," he said. "This is a nice surprise."

"None of that *mister* business," laughed Hoskins. "It makes me feel old. And, blast it, I'm not that old. I retired early."

"Of course. I just meant . . . Well, it's sure dandy seeing you again, Randall. How are things?"

"Well, frankly, they could be better. Don't ever retire early, Pete. Believe it or not, this former investment advisor and top accountant is having trouble making his rent this month."

"Oh? Well, maybe I can help with—"

"No, no, no. Of course not. I wouldn't dream of asking you, my boy. It's my own fault. I retired with a fine nest egg. But the horses haven't been kind this year."

"You're still betting on horses? I thought you gave it up after you dropped a hundred dollars at Hialeah five or six years ago."

"I did, but I started up again after I retired."

This latter statement was a blatant lie. Randall Hoskins had never stopped playing the ponies, had never actually tried to. He'd just told people in the office that he'd stopped so they wouldn't become nervous at the thought of their company accountant having a gambling addiction. What was different was that after his retirement he had increased his bets. Instead of wagering ten dollars here and fifty dollars there, it had become a hundred here and five hundred there—sometimes those three figures on horses in each race on an eight-race ticket.

"That's a shame," Larsen said. "I'm really sorry to hear that you're having trouble."

Larsen glanced at his wristwatch and then at the doors of the restaurant.

"How are things at the office?" Hoskins asked. "Is Old Man Andrews keeping you busy?"

"Yeah, yeah, he sure is. I could use an assistant."

"That's what I kept telling him, but he never listened. Only when he let me take you on in order to train you as my successor. And I imagine that the job is more complicated than it was when I was the accountant. As companies grow, so too do their complexities."

"That's for sure." Larsen glanced at the doors again. "The company has grown substantially during the three years since you retired."

"You know what?" Hoskins said in a low, conspiratorial tone. He glanced around, making sure no one was close enough to overhear them. Although there was pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk, nobody was within earshot. "I'll tell you a little secret."

"What's that?"

"After I'd been working there for a half dozen years, I considered embezzling from the company accounts."

Larsen paled. "Oh? Really? Well, that . . . that would've been . . . unwise. And illegal."

"Illegal? For sure! But, you know how the old man is—very dense, really, about financial matters. I always controlled the books and basically the bank accounts. I could've done it, and Andrews would never have suspected a thing. I'm sure, knowing how intransigent he was about changing anything, that the situation is still the same."

"Uh, I suppose." Larsen looked at his wristwatch again. "I'm sorry, Randall, but I've got to go. I've a luncheon date with my fiancée and she's not forgiving of me when I'm late."

"Oh, sure, sure. Sorry to have held you up, Pete."

"No problem. Believe me, another time and I'd love to talk more with you. It's just . . ." He looked over toward the doors, then back at Hoskins and shrugged like a Frenchman.

"I understand. Next time you see the old man, say hello for me. But for the love of Mike, don't tell him that I thought about tapping the till before Gironella took over."

"I . . . I won't."

Hoskins started to walk away.

"Uh, just a minute," Larsen called back. "What do you mean about someone taking over?"

Hoskins looked around him again to make sure nobody could overhear. "It was when I was thinking about robbing the till that Gironella entered the picture. That's why I decided not to do it. Not fear of the law, certainly not any concern that Andrews would find out. But then, just when I had almost worked up the nerve to do it, I learned that the Ochomanos de Oro Corporation had taken over the company."

Larsen looked puzzled. "That's just the old man's official business name, registered in Panama to save taxes. I thought it was you who set it up for him."

Hoskins laughed. "Is that what Andrews told you? No, Pete, I had nothing to do with setting it up. It's one of Gironella's companies."

"But Ochomanos owns the firm. If someone else owns Ochomanos, well, then Andrews doesn't."

"Exactly. Gironella took over the company using Ochomanos after the old man got overextended." Hoskins looked closely at Larsen. "You didn't know any of this?"

"No. Who is Gironella?"

Hoskins looked around him again. No one was close by.

"Carlos Gironella," he said, "is a Colombian drug lord who

employs a substantial number of thugs here in South Florida. He's not the biggest of drug kingpins, or the most famous, but he is easily the most vicious. It would be safer to steal from the Mafia than from Carlos Gironella."

Larsen turned white.

"I'm sure glad I didn't pocket the money," said Hoskins. "Eventually they would've discovered it, despite the old man's lack of attention to financial details. Every year or two an accountant comes up from Bogota and checks all the books. One penny missing and . . . Well, I decided to remain an honest man in action if not in thought."

Hoskins paused, waiting for Larsen to say something.

Instead Larsen turned and started walking back toward the parking lot.

"Pete? Where are you going?"

"I've . . . I've got something to tend to that I'd forgotten about."

"What about your fiancée? In the restaurant?"

Larsen stopped. He looked at the restaurant doors, then back at Hoskins. "Uh . . . I'll . . . I'll call her later and explain. This is . . . is . . . is really important."

Larsen turned and practically ran to the parking lot.

Hoskins watched Larsen disappear behind the corner of the restaurant before sinking his hands in the front pockets of his chinos and strolling back to the crosswalk.

Larsen had worked under him for the half year before his retirement. He knew the man. He realized the moment he'd seen the shiny red Lexus that it hadn't come from an inheritance or from winning the lottery. Larsen was just the sort of sneak thief who would turn his hand to embezzlement. And just the sort of coward who would now flee for his life, leaving no trace behind him of where he'd gone or how he'd departed.

The pedestrian light turned green, and Hoskins crossed Biscayne, wondering how much money Larsen had stolen from Andrews. Probably tens of thousands. Maybe hundreds of thousands. His disappearance would prompt an audit. The shortages would be found. Probably no details about when and how it was done—Larsen was as good an accountant as Hoskins—but a good accountant would be able to discover that there was a great deal of money missing. And because Larsen had run, they would know exactly who'd stolen it. But they would never find him. Not unless Ochomanos really was owned by Colombian gangsters.

Hoskins laughed. The old man and a Colombian gangster!

Andrews would faint if he ever met a street pusher, let alone a genuine drug lord.

He reached the opposite side of the boulevard and turned down the sidewalk.

Perhaps, he thought, the departure of Larsen might prompt Andrews to ask Hoskins to resume his old responsibilities. Come out of retirement. He hoped so. He'd lost everything on those lazy horses.

Randall Hoskins experienced a feeling of exhilaration unlike anything that he'd experienced since his ex got married and voided the alimony obligation. Yes, Larsen's running might open the job. Of course, the important thing was that Larsen's disappearance would focus all the attention on himself. No one would feel the necessity to question the old accountant after the new accountant fled. And this time, if he did get the job back, Hoskins would be satisfied with his salary and not create all the stress that stealing from his employer had caused. He might even secretly repay the amount he'd stolen—after he scored big on a winning horse, as he remained certain he would do someday soon. *R*

We'd like to know what your favorite AHMM stories are

In anticipation of our fiftieth anniversary in 2006, we are asking our readers, especially our long-time subscribers, to tell us what stories over the years were the most memorable, captivating, enjoyable, or otherwise remarkable. We also invite you to contribute your comments about the stories you've particularly liked.

We'll print some of the stories from your suggestions as Mystery Classics during our anniversary year. We'll also run a selected list in the magazine, including some of your comments.

Please write to: The Editors
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
475 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING



The once respectable Hotel Fairfax had, through the years, degenerated into a flea-bag tenement. Now its sole tenants were seven wanted criminals and their mates, including Mr. and Mrs. Osler. They occupied floors 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11. Each man had his specialty; one was a forger. One man was named Fred and one woman was named Lily. The wives included some brunettes, some blondes, and some with suspiciously red hair.

1. Nanette's husband is three floors below Mr. Stubbs and four floors above the embezzler. They include Artie, Burt, and Chet. Their wives all have the same hair color
2. Mr. Rand is two floors below Elmo and two floors above the gun for hire (who is not Mr. Pilcher). Their wives include Helen, Ida, and Julie; two have red hair, the other is blonde.
3. Kate's husband is somewhere below Dan and somewhere above the drug dealer (who isn't Chet). They include Mr. Stubbs, Mr. Tinker, and Mr. Ulman (who is not on the fourth floor). Two of their wives are brunettes; the other is blonde.
4. Greg lives somewhere below Mr. Tinker (who isn't Elmo) and three floors above Marie's husband. They include the burglar, counterfeiter, and embezzler. Each of their wives has a different hair color.
5. Mrs. Quirk is two floors below the arsonist's wife and two floors above Ida. None of the three is blonde.
6. Helen lives somewhere below Burt's wife and somewhere above the burglar's mate.

As might be anticipated, trouble developed. One night the drug dealer sent his wife out to make a delivery. When she returned, her screams resounded throughout the old building. Her husband lay dead from multiple stab wounds. His romantic interlude with the burglar's wife had been rudely interrupted by her husband.

Who stabbed whom?

The answer will appear in next month's issue.

See page 126 for the solution to last month's Dying Words.

THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH AND TIME

S. L. FRANKLIN

I.

The image in the mirror, I can remember thinking, was satisfactory. I looked old enough and plain enough—wearing thick-framed, mannish spectacles, no makeup, my gray-powdered hair drawn back, a conservative skirt and jacket in taupe, eminently practical shoes—to seem what I pretended: a seasoned, adult woman of sense and no nonsense, obviously capable of attending the shop full of antiques in which I found myself.

Now, of course, these many years later, I look more than sufficiently aged to pass muster in that regard, notwithstanding the “youthful genes” I’ve been accused by my husband of inheriting. In 1984, however, I normally did look rather young for my years, not by any means the “Mature Woman Preferred” of the PART-TIME HELP WANTED notice in the shop window.

The female personage whose private audience I awaited was herself of the mature, authoritative type—more slender than sturdy, her hair cut in a silvery blonde bob, her features rawboned yet striking and attractively made-up. Whereas my aim that June morning was to appear older than forty, at least one of hers seemed to be to appear younger than that same temporal benchmark.

The shop itself was perhaps thirty feet wide and fifty deep with additional small alcoves along the far wall, and it was cluttered as such boutiques generally are with a vast range of items for sale, from massive cabinetry at one end of the scale to a display of hat



pins at the other, all organized in this particular instance to give an impression of tasteful disarray. Antique clocks were a particular specialty of the house, a fact of which I was aware prior to my entrance, and as I waited for Saundra Wright to finish her telephone conversation, I recognized from my brief, overnight study two floor-standing "long case" clocks near where I stood and a school clock hanging on the wall beside the mirror in front of me, each with a distinct appearance, one English looking, one French, one American. The towering French clock, though crafted in a markedly austere style, had inscribed across its "dial" *Le triump de verité et temps*.

Conversation ended at last, the woman rose from behind the counter in the center of the room and waited to catch my attention before saying, "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. Is there a particular thing you're looking for?"

Upon hearing her easy, confident voice I understood better my husband's warning: Saundra Wright's was a formidable personality. "No," I answered. "Or not unless you include work. I'm here to ask about the job you have open."

"Oh." As she examined me for a telling second or two her face took on an expression of curiosity intermingled with calculation. She finally stepped around the counter and came forward. "The hours are weekends and Thursday evenings. If you can't work those faithfully—"

"I can," I replied.

"Then let's talk." She strode past me with a purpose and locked the entry door, then picked up a small sign in the shape of a clock from a nearby table. "We'll give ourselves twenty minutes." She adjusted the moveable hands and hung it from a suction hook on the glass of the door. "Come with me."

I followed her back through the store and out into the alley behind, with a brief stop as she gathered up her purse and another as she double-locked the rear door. From there she led me around a corner to a small storefront diner where we took seats in a booth along the window.

"First your name," she said. "I'm Saundra Wright."

"Virginia Robb," I responded with a nod, and thus engaged in my initial direct deception in the affair, insofar as Robb was my maiden, not my married name.

After we ordered coffee she took a pack of cigarettes from her purse. "Do you smoke?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Your complexion is too fresh. That makes it

easier, since you mustn't ever smoke on the premises." She lit a cigarette. "Tell me about yourself."

"I—I'm a housewife currently. I have a college degree, but my youngest child still hasn't entered school and our preference has always been to avoid putting the children in day care. Quite suddenly, though, we're in need of extra income." My second lie: we were always in need of extra income. "I heard about this job and the emphasis on weekend hours and . . . decided to inquire."

"What kind of work have you done?"

"I've been a school counselor, although not for some time. I also worked in my parents' store through college."

"What kind of business was it?"

"Oh, just a produce market. It's not, I realize, anything at all like antiques, but I have waited on the public."

"Your husband, I take it, would manage the children while you work?"

"Yes."

"Without fail?"

"Yes. Although we have other options on weekends. I noticed that the shop doesn't open until twelve thirty on Sundays. What would be the starting time?"

In that moment our coffee arrived and Saundra Wright sipped from her cup and puffed on her cigarette before responding, "Twelve fifteen to get set up. You're rather transparent in a way, but I like that, Virginia. You could be outstandingly pretty, you know, with makeup and your hair tinted, but I suppose there's a religious reason of some kind. . . ." She peered at me over her coffee cup without mockery.

"I teach Sunday school," I said to avoid telling another direct lie. "It's over at ten thirty. Could I ask what the job pays and what the responsibilities are? I—having seen your shop, that is, I honestly think I could work there. I was concerned that I might feel intimidated." I glanced at my watch, then went on, "I'm not trying to rush you, by the way, but since this isn't a weekend, a neighbor is watching the children, and I have to be back by eleven."

"I understand." She contemplated for a few seconds, then said, "It's Wednesday. Could you come in tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow? I suppose, yes. If—"

"I could only start you at the minimum wage, three thirty-five an hour."

"Oh." I looked away from her before loosening my most blatant lie, the risky "play hard to get" lie suggested by my husband. "Then it's probably not worth it to me, I'm afraid. I have another

possibility that pays four dollars very near home, and this is a twenty-minute drive. It's not what anyone could call a prestige job, though, so I was rather hoping—"

"Four thirty-five, then. And commission on any item you sell over two hundred dollars, as I was about to say. In other words, Virginia, I'm not only desperate; you're just the type of person I want."

"I—"

"Understand me," she commanded with a look of humorous determination. "I'm not letting you leave until you say yes. I like you already, and I've made up my mind."

"Thank you," I responded after a pause. "It's very gratifying to be wanted, I admit." I allowed myself to smile for the first time in her presence. "But—I would still like to know about the responsibilities."

"Good. I'll tell you and show you when we go back to the shop."

The responsibilities of the job were, in fact, already known to me in a general sense: to assist Saundra Wright on Saturdays all day and to manage the premises alone on Sunday afternoons and Thursday evenings.

"My last helper," she told me, after explaining my more pertinent duties, "appears to have run off, or that's what everyone either fears or hopes. It's disturbing. She simply failed to show up one evening. A girl barely out of her teens . . ." She shook her head. "I won't bore you with the details, but she was one unmotivated, unreliable young girl too many for me. I'll cut back hours before I employ another one."

"Her parents—I should tell you this much, I suppose. They've hired a detective, a large, imposing man, to search for her, and if he comes around asking questions while I'm not here—" A pause to sip coffee. "She—the girl—was as secretly unhappy in my employ, it seems, as I was with her performance, and she grumbled about me so much to her parents that now I'm viewed somehow as a possible *motivating* factor in her running off. The detective is unmistakable: he wears thick glasses and has a full-fledged strawberry mark across one cheek. *And* he threatened to return with more questions, although I can hardly guess what. Shoo him out if he comes in while I'm not here. That's the long and the short of it."

I was given a brief tour of the shop, a large introductory book to study on the subject of antiques, and an uncomfortable but sincere hug at the door upon my departure, along with the words, "Please—if you have any questions or misgivings at all, Virginia,

call me at once. I'm very anxious to have you work for me."

And thus began one of the stranger episodes in my true part-time career, the one as assistant to the large, imposing detective with the birthmarked cheek, the man so troubling to Sandra Wright, who also happens after these many years still to be my husband, R. J. Carr.

On the following evening my initial impression of Sandra Wright was confirmed. She was indeed somewhat authoritative and capricious, but she was also genial and extremely competent, both in her knowledge of antiques and in her management of Wright's Treasures. That Thursday night and Saturday all day were to be my training sessions. Even though I've always been what is called a "quick study," the vast ranges of information and the huge number of specific items in the shop with which I had to familiarize myself threatened to overwhelm my covert purpose, namely, to discover the mystery in the background, if one existed, that might point in the direction of the missing girl, Michelle Stone.

The larger mystery, according to my husband, was Michelle Stone herself. Twenty years old, living in the home of an older sister with whom she spent little time, a part-time junior college student on close terms with neither of her parents, who were divorced—she seemed sadly of a type: without motivation, agreeable in person but secretly moody, habitually short on funds, preferring dance clubs to school, encounters with young men to family and friends.

"Probably not worth retrieving at twice the price," R. J. groused to me after his initial round of investigation the previous week. "Still—she's Nathan's granddaughter. So I guess . . ." Followed by one of his characteristic shrugs.

Nathan Stein, whose cleaning and tailoring establishment lay across Belmont Avenue from R. J.'s office, was in fact the client in the case, not either of the girl's parents, who had been content to report her perplexing final leave-taking to the police several days after her departure from their other daughter's home. "Don't wait dinner on me," she had reportedly said in a cheerful manner. "Or breakfast, lunch, or any other meal. I'm out of here."

Since Michelle seldom ate with her sister and brother-in-law, the comment was regarded at first as humorous sarcasm. Later, however, after discovering a variety of the girl's possessions and clothing missing from her room, they took a more concerned view. Calls to the separate parents, the girl's few known friends, the favored grandfather merely spread unease. She hadn't communicated to

anyone and her whereabouts were unknown.

The only inference to be drawn with relative certainty was that her departure had been both voluntary and premeditated. She had taken her last exam of the semester on a Tuesday, apparently secreted her getaway possessions elsewhere on the Wednesday following, and walked out of her sister's home later that day carrying only her purse and leaving only a cryptic comment behind.

She hadn't owned a car and so was untraceable in that fashion, and she hadn't, if the police were to be believed, either rented a car or reserved a plane, train, or bus ticket in her own name either before or after her disappearance. The week prior to her departure she had indeed emptied her bank account, but the one hundred seventy dollar withdrawal seemed an unlikely getaway stake.

Everything—or rather, these few things—suggested the existence of another person in the girl's plan, either to hide out with or run off with, but that other person, if he or she existed, was unnamable by family or friends. An elopement with a secret lover was theoretically possible, but no such lover was known to exist by any of the three young women with whom she shared an occasional intimacy. To their knowledge she hadn't gone out seriously with any man for several months. In fact, one of her many complaints was that she couldn't seem to meet one whom she found sufficiently mature to tolerate for more than an evening. Or so both the police and my husband were told.

In appearance she was of average height and build with an open, winning face and reddish bronze hair. Her outward personality matched her photograph in that it was positive and friendly without being aggressively so, but inwardly, or so the entire chorus of friends and family agreed, she suffered a great deal of disenchantment.

"I talked to her father," R. J. told me, "and he said, 'Look, it's simple—the girl can't decide who she is. With me she's Mary and all the saints. With her mother she's a Jewish princess. Backwards, of course.'"

Her parents were Michelle's most vocal subject of complaint—their separation and divorce while she had been in her early teens, their ongoing bickering over custodial rights and responsibilities, their perceived indifference to her in their remarriages. Spiting them for their negligence seemed a possible motive for her lack of communication, if not her running off, but in R. J.'s words, "It doesn't lead anyplace. Unless everyone's lying, her situation has been the same for a year and a half. They're not distant to her, just not close. And Nathan tells me a lot of that's her own fault."

R. J.'s early reputation as a detective had been built in large

measure on his ability to trace missing persons, but after four fruitless days of investigation and a thousand dollars billed without result to a longtime friend who could scarcely afford it, R. J. admitted to being almost stymied. "The girl's technically an adult," he said. "And since she took stuff with her the cops aren't that concerned. In the first place, she's only been gone a couple of weeks, and in the second, no bodies have turned up that could be hers. Not yet, anyway. And that's the real worry; don't think it isn't. She's not a screwball or a dope, and if this were a criminal case it would be right up there with the toughest ones to crack because she did it simply and executed it perfectly."

"Perfectly—as far as you've discovered," I ventured.

"Or haven't discovered. I haven't even gotten close enough to get a feel for it, Ginny—that's the problem. Nathan, though, he's what worries me. He really loves that girl, and he doesn't think she'd simply skip out or drop from sight to cause trouble. Grandfathers can be deceived, just like parents, but I think Nathan's pretty clear-eyed about her."

"And?"

"I can't take any more of his money without something to go on, that's all, and the only thing I haven't tried yet is the place where she worked. It's an antique store up on Touhy, and Michelle secretly hated the owner. She told one of her friends that the woman, and I quote, was 'creepy and immoral'—which doesn't really mean anything, true, but everyone I interviewed from her sister to her ex-boyfriend from last year substantiated that view. Still, it's not much of a motive for running off, and the cop I spoke to who interviewed the owner said that she was mainly upset over the girl's not showing up. It's a shot so long, in other words, that I haven't bothered to take it."

"Until now."

"Right."

By my second Thursday evening at Wright's Treasures—my first working alone—I felt reasonably at ease with reference to managing the store and answering questions about the items around me, thanks to Saundra Wright's card file system, in which every piece of note was indexed and described. About Saundra Wright herself, however, I felt unreasonably perplexed. From our first conversation, in truth, I'd discovered myself questioning, if not indeed rejecting, the suitability of "creepy and immoral" as terms with which to describe her. True enough, she was a little too at ease for my taste with financial gain as the primary goal in her life; she also

attempted an intimacy of friendship too quickly and too forcibly, but only, I suspected, because it was in her nature and because she did like me as a person as well as a prospective employee. That she eased the boredom of her afternoons with a secret three o'clock indulgence of whiskey and soda in the privacy of her office might have offended severely the puritan she considered me to be, but it didn't particularly the woman I was.

Beyond these hardly objectionable traits and habits I found her a congenial and interesting person. Long separated from her husband; I was told, the mother of two children "grown and gone," she devoted her life to finding true antiques—"not fifty-year-old hubcaps"—having them restored when necessary, and selling them profitably to those who appreciated old and beautiful things. That she herself appreciated them was obvious. Even I, whose desiderata are generally modern, clean, and spare, found myself contemplating if not coveting a number of the pieces in the shop and one especially, all far beyond our means.

Thursday was "duty night," Sandra had told me the previous week. The retail merchant's association along that commercial stretch still held to the by-then-outmoded practice of Thursday evening shopping hours; as a member of the association, she had always gone along, even though Thursday evening antique shoppers were few, and sales were fewer.

On my first Thursday, when she had stayed to train me, a total of eleven people entered the store between five o'clock and nine, and not a single penny changed hands. On my second Thursday I sold a lovely hand-carved wooden box and a hideous decorative whatnot to the same retired couple, who came in twice, netting around ninety dollars to offset my wages and the cost of lighting and air-conditioning the premises for four hours. Otherwise, except for monitoring a handful of casual browsers, I had the shop to myself for most of the evening and spent much of it browsing myself—through the desk and files in Sandra's office—feeling, of course, like the betrayer of confidence that I was and discovering nothing immediately relevant.

Fifteen minutes before the shop closed, however, something happened that was both unexpected and inexplicable. As I was sitting on a stool behind the counter in the center of the store, idling through a tome on antique furniture, an unlikely looking shopper came through the entrance—a tall, bearded man in his forties dressed in Levi's and a casual pullover, neither of them new. He had, I thought, the loose, angular frame of someone who did physical work for a living; someone in the building trades, perhaps. As I rose

from the stool, he halted briefly to assess either myself or my presence prior to ambling across to one of the alcoves and examining an antique highboy. After a few moments of study, he pulled open one of the drawers and glanced inside, then pushed it closed and stepped back. He moved past me with barely a nod to a perfectly restored small writing desk in an ornate style that I didn't care for. Again he seemed to study the piece, taking it in from several angles and distances, then he circled past toward the front until he came to one of the long case clocks that I had noticed on my first appearance in Wright's Treasures. He examined it very thoroughly from top to bottom, opened the front to peer inside the pendulum chamber, and finally turned to me with an aggressive expression on his face and asked, "What d'ya know about this clock?"

I stepped nearer to him before answering, near enough to make the provisional judgment that in spite of his unusual behavior, he looked neither dangerous nor deranged.

"I know . . . or rather, it's a Morbier clock from French Canada"—a slight correction on my original assumption—"dating from around 1820. A peddler, you see, would go from settlement to settlement selling the clock proper and providing a diagram for the design of the wooden case. The buyer, usually a French immigrant farmer or townsman, would have the case built by the local carpenter if he couldn't craft it himself. That's why no two Morbier clocks are known to be more than passingly alike. The cases are made out of the locally available woods and reflect the skills of whoever made them. They're interesting for several other reasons—"

"Yeah?"

"The—the most appealing to me is that they chime on the hour a second time, at three minutes after, if I'm remembering correctly, so that the farmer out in his field had another chance to hear the time."

"You're just a regular little mine of information, aren't you."

"No," I said, responding to the challenge in his words and eyes. "Not at all. I just started here a week ago, in fact, and I've learned very little, but I love this particular clock, you see, and so I . . . It's very obviously a peasant's clock, a French peasant's clock, and my mother's family were French peasant farmers. It moves me, somehow."

My previous description of the man failed to include the facts that his darkish hair was long and unruly and his eyes were small and deep set. In that moment he fixed his eyes on mine like a not-so-ancient mariner and remarked, "It moves you? You? Hah!"

Then he closed and refastened the front of the clock, gave me a

final dismissive inspection, and strode out of the store in a state of such apparent anger and hostility that it left me blushing at my indiscreet enthusiasm and any number of other failures I perceived in myself after such a dismissal. I was not so taken aback, however, that I failed to examine the third drawer down in the highboy, the underside of the writing desk, and the interior of the clock case to discover, if I could, what it was that the man had secretly been looking for.

II.

"How would you like to earn a little money on weekends?"

"Doing what?"

"Selling antiques."

This was how my complicity in the affair actually began; and I can remember raising up from leaning against R. J. on the living room sofa to look at him. It was a Sunday evening, I also remember, and he'd been out in the afternoon.

"Temporarily," he conceded when our eyes met.

"No doubt. Then the antique shop—"

"Mature Woman Preferred. No more college kids like Michelle Stone, the only problem being that you still look like a college kid yourself."

"And you, for some reason, are talking like one. Whatever did you find out to prompt this notion?"

"Nothing—or next to it," he said. I waited, pretending dubiousness. "The woman who owns the place is named Saundra Wright. I asked around at some of the neighboring businesses on Friday before dropping in on her this afternoon, and she didn't draw unmixed reviews. Nothing too specific—a user, that was the big thing, always begging favors and not returning any. No friendly eighty percent discounts on the mantel clock the wife picked out.

"In person she's the preferred mature woman. You don't care for mixed metaphors, but she was like a stone wall and a dynamo combined—brisk, efficient, and in control. Friendly, up to a point."

"The point being?"

"She wouldn't give me the time of day about Michelle, and in my experience almost anyone who was in her situation would have been anxious to talk. I ended up having to cross-question her like a hostile witness:

"Did the girl have any reason to dislike you?' *None.*

"Would it surprise you to hear that she did dislike you?' *No.*

"Was she happy in her work?' *So-so.*

"Any signs of personal disgruntlement toward the end?' *No.*

" 'Any ideas about why she took off?' *None.*

" 'Anyone else she might have met while working here who could tell me anything?' A pause to think, then a shake of the head.

" 'Any comments?' *Not really. She wasn't a good worker, but she was a nice girl, and I thought we got along.*"

R. J. shrugged. "That was as garrulous as she got about Michelle, so either I've lost my touch, Ginny, or she was giving me the stiff arm for no good reason I could see. Everything told me she was holding herself in and being friendly and polite to get rid of me as fast as possible." He gave a different shrug. "So I told her I'd probably be back in a few days with more questions—just to see what would happen."

"And?"

"For just a split second her expression changed." He made a face of exaggerated alarm. "And after that we talked about antiques. This isn't a junk store, by the way. She sells only top-flight stuff, beautiful clocks, fancy plates and knickknacks, furniture. She runs the place by herself except for a helper on Saturday who handles Sunday afternoons and Thursday evenings for her—Michelle Stone the past fifteen months. The place is closed Mondays and Tuesday mornings. She's looking hard for a replacement, but isn't taking anyone under forty."

"I'm thirty-five. And you haven't given me a single good reason for doing it. She may just have been intimidated by you."

"Nope. What's wrong with this picture, Ginny? A super-competent, outwardly friendly, self-assured woman who likes to talk—did I mention that?—plus a young woman missing in peculiar, worrying circumstances. So why the monosyllabic answers? It may not have anything to do with why Michelle took off, but something's definitely fishy there."

"Possibly. Although my applying for the job seems approximately one step removed from grasping at straws."

"Two steps."

I pondered for a moment. "There's no guarantee, of course, that this woman will hire me."

"She's desperate for the mature woman preferred. Not only that, she told me she's so exhausted by the extra hours she's worked that she's taking two full days away from the place for R and R. So if you show up there first thing Wednesday morning—"

"Looking mature, naturally."

"You will have to age yourself about fifteen years."

"Five, thank you."

"Twelve minimum."

"Flatterer. In the meantime, what will you be doing?"

"Catching up with my security clients and waiting for something to happen."

III.

"Something happened tonight," I told him the moment I got home.

It was nine twenty-five on the evening preceding our tenth wedding anniversary, and both children were in bed and one asleep. Husband and wife, fatigued from supernumerary labors, met and embraced before said wife visited three bedrooms to kiss one sleeping child, exchange good-nights and hugs with another, and change out of her work costume into a nightgown and robe, the artificial cast of gray in her hair seeming appropriate to her wearied condition. A reward of sorts, tea and buttered toast; she discovered waiting on the coffee table in the living room.

"I don't know if this means anything," I said through a mouthful of toast, "but . . ."

"Tell me about it."

"At eight forty-five a man came in alone—"

"Describe him."

"Six feet tall. Rangy build. Long hair and beard, hair mostly dark, beard mostly gray. Deep-set, intense eyes. He was obviously familiar with the shop. He glared at me, then ignored me until he'd made a tour to inspect three pieces, a highboy chest, a writing desk, and that Morbier clock I told you about—the one you're buying me for our anniversary tomorrow. Then the man addressed me out of the blue, asking about the clock. Luckily, or so I thought at the time, it's a piece that I know about, and so I told him various things and expressed my own liking for it.

"Then he deliberately insulted me and walked out."

"What?"

"I . . . got carried away. I told him the clock moved me because of my French peasant ancestors, and he said, 'It moves you? You? Hah!'—just like that. But that's not the important part, R. J. After he left, even though I felt rather like dirt—"

"He'll be feeling like something worse than dirt when I catch up to him."

"Quiet. I examined the three pieces in order, just the way he'd done, looked in all the hidden places he'd looked, and I found in each place that a small, faint marking, almost invisible, had been stained somehow onto the grain of the wood. It was like a verti-

cal oval with an M inside. I copied one—see?”

I drew a piece of paper from the pocket of my robe and held it out to him.



R. J. took the paper from my hand and studied it. “Or an egg with big white teeth. Wow. So who was he, what was he doing, and what does the mark mean?”

“And how does it relate to the disappearance of Michelle Stone?”

“It’s not the drawing of a stone with an M on it for Michelle—I’m not buying that,” R. J. said.

“What about a provisional hypothesis?”

“Sure. It’s late and I’m easy.”

“*Hah*—as the bearded man remarked. However . . . he came in just before closing on a Thursday night, and he was familiar with the shop and its contents and knew what he was about with the pieces he touched. Perhaps I didn’t make that clear. He also gave me the impression that he was a superior workman of some kind. He had that way of moving.

“And so here’s my hypothesis: He’s the man who restored those three pieces for Saundra Wright. He came this evening because he knew she wouldn’t be on the premises, and he wanted to check to see if his secret mark or workman’s signature had been discovered and effaced. And—”

“Michelle Stone used to work Thursday nights.”

“Who’s hypothesizing now?”

“I’m stating a fact—maybe the only relevant fact, as far as what happened tonight is concerned. But let’s get on with your theory. He’s done this sort of work for Saundra Wright for x number of years and—”

“Yes. That’s part of it. He knows that his mark goes against her grain—”

“Ho-ho.”

“—and he lives in fear—well, anxiety—that she’s going to wake up to what he’s been doing, and therefore periodically he goes into the shop in her absence to check up on his subterfuge—meaning, for the last few months, in Michelle Stone’s presence. A most unlikely and unsatisfactory theory, now that I’ve put it into words.”

“Right. Except, Ginny, except for the link with Michelle. Here’s

a guy connected in some suspicious way with the antique shop who almost certainly was known to Michelle. That much I'll buy. So what's his name?"

Though doubtless unfashionably restrained, our anniversary celebration the next evening, even without the Morbier clock, seemed a great occasion at the time—ten years as co-conspirators against the world at large and its defilements. We did dwell perhaps excessively on the seeming length of our marriage—its trials and accomplishments, the child we'd lost, the two we cherished, our enduring bond—and barely gave a speculative look forward to the days and years I see now strangely past or soon to pass. Those two children have "grown and gone" and formed marriages of their own, while their parents have learned over time to look upon both trials and accomplishments with greater patience and a longer perspective.

It was with no perspective whatsoever, I'm afraid, that I arrived the following Saturday morning at Wright's Treasures, feeling scant enthusiasm for either antiques or mysterious occurrences. When Saundra welcomed me like a long-lost sister, however, I was irrationally cheered in spite of my equivocal position and the knowledge that I was doomed to disappoint her in another week or two. And as before, I bridled privately against the judgment that she was "creepy and immoral." She was certainly not "creepy," and her immorality seemed to consist of modest social vices so commonplace as to beg the question—smoking, drinking, and a preference for wealth and possessions.

Michelle Stone's judgment of her, in fact, began to seem almost as mysterious a factor in the affair as the appearance of the bearded stranger on Thursday night.

Trade in the shop began briskly that day, and it was one fifteen before Saundra very kindly sent me around to the diner for the first lunch break and half an hour of welcome rest. Upon my return I found her seated behind the counter of an empty store, what she termed the "afternoon doldrums" having begun.

"Virginia, you were marvelous this morning," she said when she saw me come in. "Better than any helper I've had for years, even after they'd learned the ropes." When I denied having shown any special ability, she chided, "Modesty, modesty. We're a good team, I think."

Following her departure to the diner, I waited five full minutes before betraying her confidence and friendship again by pursuing my covert purpose. A vague recollection had begun to nag at me

that morning with reference to the Morbier clock, and so I was anxious to look it up again in her index file, minus her presence in the store.

... purchased 5/12/83 from estate of Nancy Halverson, Bartlett, Ill. Said to have been found in poor condition late 1950's by woman's late husband, a collector, in a barn near Ottawa, Ontario. Clock and case both restored and reconditioned by husband to current state. Two gears definitely replaced, tin can weights new. Some rust and corrosion on works. Small hairline crack in brass work lower right. Case restored exceptionally, original finish said to have been darker ...

On the card for the highboy chest I found:

... unrestored. Excellent condition, possibly from Wilker and Son, Philadelphia (see distinctive foot), 1840's ...

And on the card for the writing desk:

... restored and refinished 1972, after left front leg damaged in move from Washington to Illinois. Believed to be desk used by Charles Allen Todd of Rhode Island during his term in Congress. American on a French model, maker unknown. Date unknown, probably earlier than 1810 ...

Meaning, of course, that my hypothesis about the secret marks on the pieces in question was largely or totally wrong.

Having suffered through a covertly perplexed afternoon, uneasy evening, and literally prayerful morning, I arrived at Wright's Treasures the following day determined to wait upon events. Theorizing in detective investigation is, of course, an attempt to hurry things along, and I am by nature a hurrier as well as a worrier. R. J., in contrast, is one whose repeated dictum always has been, "It's a mistake to theorize on insufficient data." He treated me kindly, nevertheless, and refused to gloat, saying instead, "Those markings aren't an accident, Ginny, whatever they mean, and that jerk who insulted you is part of the picture, and the picture includes Michelle Stone, so things are happening. If the guy shows up again today ..."

After unlocking the back door and rushing inside to neutralize the shop's alarm system, I switched on the overhead lights and stepped a few paces into the rear of the selling area, at which point the view ahead caused me to stop short. The large outline

of the highboy to my right was absent; the towering Morbier clock at the front of the store was gone; the perfect and polished congressman's writing desk had disappeared. One of the school clocks was also gone, as well as a slat-backed chair.

I stood there and gaped for several seconds while my mind swarmed with various unhappy thoughts, then I turned and strode back to Sandra Wright's office and dialed a number on the telephone. At the conclusion of the recorded message I said, "R. J., it's me. Please pick up."

"Yeah?"

"They're gone—all three pieces and at least two others."

A silence.

"Even the clock?"

"Yes."

"Whew. Have you called her?"

"Not yet."

"Don't. I'll be there in a few minutes, say half an hour, with or without Jeanie and Steve. Go ahead and open up. This is progress—maybe."

At five minutes after one he arrived alone, easing into the store from the rear, even though the back door was locked from the outside—a characteristic act on his part, as was his next, rifling Sandra Wright's office while I maintained my composure before a trio of casual shoppers. At their departure I hung the clock sign on the front door—BACK AT 1:30—and locked it and joined him in the office.

"Nothing at all shows that she sold or contracted on those items," R. J. said, looking up from his inspection of an open file drawer. "Was the alarm system on when you came in?"

"Yes."

Our eyes met.

"Everything taken, R. J., was made out of wood except the clock works. I refuse to believe that fact is happenstantial."

"Right. Tomorrow I'll get at it. Today, though, I'm on the hook to take your children swimming. Good thing Mrs. Andersen was home."

We kissed and he departed. I then dialed Sandra Wright's answering machine and left a vague message before reopening the store, after which I was harried by a steady flow of customers for the ensuing three hours and made my first two commission sales.

When Sandra called back it was five o'clock and I had just locked the front door and turned off the lights.

"Virginia? Is something wrong? I've been out prospecting all day, but your message—"

"I—did you have a huge sale last night or some kind of pick-up after I left? Because there were five rather large items missing when I came in."

"Wh—?" She halted abruptly, mid word, then went on, "Which . . . items were they?"

I named the five pieces for her, keeping silent, as I had the previous day, about the strange man, then concluded by saying, "I didn't call the police because I wanted to check with you first. But I will now, if you'd like. I can stay for a while. I've talked to my husband . . ."

"No. No, you go on home. I'll take care of it. It's strange and scary, though, and—and what happened to the alarm system, Virginia?"

"My husband's question, too," I answered. "I don't know. It was on when I came in."

"You go home. I'm sure you're drained from worry. Now it's my turn."

If I hadn't abandoned all speculation and theorizing for the duration of the affair, of course, I doubtless would have puzzled to contrive an explanation for Sandra's relative imperturbability in our conversation, not to mention her rather belated show of curiosity. Instead, I merely reported these impressions to R. J., who thought briefly, then frowned at me. "Two and two make four: who else had a key to the door? It all fits together, in other words. Too bad it doesn't make much sense."

When I couldn't fall asleep that night I found myself embellishing on R. J.'s impromptu verse:

One and one make two (I began);
Why was Michelle so blue?

But she wasn't blue, I thought. Not at the end. She seemed happy, or that was my impression. Released. Secretly eager to get away. Why? Because she was striking back at all her imagined sources of disenchantment.

Two and two make four;
Who had a key to the door?

Michelle Stone, obviously. And she also knew the proper sequence with which to disable the alarm system and then set it working again. That Sandra Wright had thought so little of any

threat in this arena that she hadn't bothered to change either the lock or the alarm upon the girl's disappearance was a greater puzzle, one which led me to another rhyme:

Three and three make six;
How is the girl in the mix?

Because whatever else it meant, the theft of the antiques was on one level a symbolic act, a blow struck at Saundra Wright by a man seething with anger and bristling with hostility. Was Michelle his tool, his dupe, his accomplice, his lover?

Four and four make eight . . .

I felt myself drowsing. *Four and four make eight . . . eight . . . bait . . . hate. What could have caused the man's hate? Or . . . wait . . . great . . . fate . . . Why—why was the woman sedate?*

And in that moment I knew the outline of the truth.

"R. J.!" I said as my eyes came open. I reached out to him in the dark, still in a partial drowse in fact, thinking, *Why did she wake up her mate?*

At twelve forty-two A.M. by the clock on the dashboard, I braked my little Ford wagon to a halt behind Saundra Wright's large custom van along a deserted commercial avenue about a mile from her shop. She was pacing the sidewalk smoking a cigarette, and as I got out to join her I looked up at the sign on the building across the way:

Ott Michelberger, Master Craftsman

Custom Woodworking & Furniture

Stripping Refinishing Repair

"Virginia?" She dropped her cigarette in the gutter, then evaluated with momentary wariness my unbound black hair, absence of glasses, and splash of lipstick.

"Ginny," I said. "Please. And Carr, as I told you on the phone. I'm sorry."

"I am too." She put her hand on my arm. "I guess both of our deceptions are doomed. Well . . ."

I followed her across the dark, empty street. "Wright is also my maiden name, strangely enough. Michelberger's Deli, yes. Michelberger's Antiques, no. I own this building."

She took a deep, sighing breath before hunting in her purse for keys and unlocking the door. "It still seems incredible that

Otto could have enticed that lackadaisical girl, but you must be right. What's the term? There are extenuating circumstances. He—"

We stepped into a darker darkness and a pervasive atmosphere of wood and chemical smells. When she switched on a strip of ceiling lights I saw a large, open room with a work desk and a drafting table in one corner. Otherwise it held innumerable pieces of old, even ancient furniture in varying states of disrepair, innumerable old planks of wood, innumerable cans of stains, varnishes, and other chemicals of the trade. Along a wall at the rear, however, clustered close together, were the five missing pieces from Wright's Treasures.

A light came on deeper in the building that shone through a doorway into the room where we stood.

"Who the hell is that?" said a voice I remembered. I drew out the pistol I'd brought along, but Saundra, when she saw it, shook her head at me with a look of horror.

"I thought it was you," said Otto Michelberger from the doorway. "Who's that?"

He carried a large iron bar in one hand and had the appearance of someone recently awakened, although he was fully clothed. When Saundra stepped toward him he stepped back, and I followed behind, fingering the gun in my jacket pocket.

"Otto—what lies have you been telling that girl?" Saundra's question hung in the air for a moment until we all stood near a large, combined woodworking apparatus in the interior room, a long table with tools and saws stationed or built on at various points.

"What girl? What lies?" He reached out abruptly and jabbed a button, setting a band saw into noisy motion at the near end of the table. "I-told-her-the—truth!" he shouted above the squeal and whirl. Then he jabbed the button again, and in the quiet that followed I asked, "What truth, Mr. Michelberger?"

He raised the bar in his hand for a moment, then lowered it. "Who are you? I've seen you before."

He looked at me closely, as he had three days earlier, then shook his head. "I told her I made those things. Me! It's the truth! And I told her that Sandy had thought it up and twisted me and turned me like a table leg on a lathe."

"You know that's not true, Otto."

Saundra spoke calmly and slowly, as if to a child. When he raised the bar again, this time as if to strike her, I drew out the pistol and commanded, "Put that down—now."

He stared for a long second or two at the gun before letting the bar drop clanging onto the concrete floor.

"Otto, are you taking your medication?"

"Why? Are you taking yours?"

"Virginia—Ginny. Look at me, please." I turned my head but kept Otto Michelberger in view. "Otto and I have engaged in a deception for several years. Otto is the father of my children. He is a great craftsman—"

"A great *artisan*!"

"A very great artisan. But he suffers from . . . an emotional disorder—"

"You do. Not me."

"—and it is an expensive disorder to treat. We together, Otto and I, thought up a way for him to pay for his treatment by applying his skills." She pointed behind her and continued, "In that room are the raw materials he uses to make 'antiques.' Old woods, old finishing compounds. The buyers of those 'antiques' are always advised that the provenance and authenticity can't be vouched for, but not one buyer in twelve years, Ginny, has purchased an inferior piece of furniture. What Otto makes and I sell for him are better than the best reproductions. They're unique. He barely makes a living otherwise, though; so those purchases pay for his therapy, his medication, hospitalization—"

"Sandy!"

"—for damages in a lawsuit. Otto isn't insurable, you see. We aren't married anymore—I lied when I said that we'd only separated. It wasn't . . . safe. Or wise. What did you tell that girl, Otto?"

He glowered at her for a second like a naughty child caught out in a lie, then sprang forward but halted when he saw the pistol raised up again in my hand.

"Michelle Stone, Mr. Michelberger?"

He stepped back to his former place, then suddenly made his way along the work table pressing buttons and bringing machinery to life in a cacophony of sound. As he did so, a doorway opened behind him and through it appeared a young woman in torn clothing with her face so battered that both eyes seemed swollen shut. She was rubbing her wrists and sobbing, and R. J.'s grip on her from behind, I felt sure, was all that kept her on her feet.

At R. J.'s signal I circled the table, pressing buttons and throwing switches to undo Otto Michelberger's childish mischief, and when silence was again established, I heard Sandra's voice cry out, "Michelle, poor Michelle! Whatever did he tell you?"

IV.

"The one thing nobody mentioned about your granddaughter, Nathan, was that she was a sentimental idealist."

"Who knew?"

R. J.'s client had closed his shop early for once and come to the three-flat for dinner.

"Also, a sucker for a plausible story."

"She's human. So? The main thing is, she wasn't found dead. A broken nose, though, a black eye or two—it's a hard way to learn. Was she in love with this Michelbag? I don't want to know. But what lies did he tell her?"

"Half lies, half distortions." I waited for Nathan to turn toward me. He was in his early seventies, bald and bent, a widower. He was R. J.'s longtime friend, but I had met him only once or twice. "Michelle befriended him on those long, slow Thursday nights when the store was quiet. On medication, by the way, he is supposed to have a great deal of rather tragic charm. His life, as Michelle heard it told, was a tragedy. He told her he suffered from a mild emotional affliction, which bipolar disorder is definitely not, and his ex-wife and the courts had used it as a pretext to separate him from his children and his wealth, and then turn him into a virtual indentured servant, wasting his talents and corrupting his principles to produce fake antiques for her to sell in return for an allowance of pennies, while she, of course, kept the bulk of the profits and lived the good life.

"I don't mean to whitewash Sandra Wright, even though I like her very much. She is hardly a villainess in this affair. When Otto's illness led to his beating his wife and child, there seemed to be no means of controlling him in his manic episodes, if that is the correct term, so she made the decision to divorce him rather than continue to put herself and her children at risk, both physically and financially. I think the decision must have been very hard on her because she isn't at all cold-blooded by nature, but quite warmhearted—except perhaps where money is concerned.

"The divorce kept her business intact and—since she was the main breadwinner in the family—absolved it and her from the financial drain she foresaw as a result of her husband's ongoing illness, instability, and violent episodes. But she did feel a responsibility for him, Nathan. A thing he conveniently forgot to tell your granddaughter was that the building in which he lives and works Sandra Wright provides to him rent free, which means, I suspect, that she pays the taxes and utilities for him as well. Otto has eked out a living there for twelve years, almost in spite of himself, it

seems, since his unreliability and emotional difficulties militate against his woodworking skills.

"As for the deception they practiced with the bogus antiques, I prefer to take Sandra's word that she has always charged a ten percent commission on the sales for her time and trouble and put the rest in an account from which she parcels out payments to him for therapy, medications, and so on, because he isn't a reliable manager.

"Their scheme of fakery is reprehensible, I admit, and Sandra is more to be blamed than Otto Michelberger for sanctioning it and carrying it out. And yet—"

"The joke there, Nathan," R. J. interjected, "is that the value of the pieces as reproductions is not much less than if they were genuine because the workmanship is so good. So what do we do about it? Inform the consumer fraud people and ruin Sandra Wright's reputation with a court case and fines, or keep our mouths shut?"

"You're asking me?" The old man shrugged. "If the authenticity is not vouched for and the work is nice . . . ?"

"And the deception is stopped," I added.

"Right," R. J. said. "Labeled as reproductions from now on. So we're engaged in one more conspiracy of silence, provided that everyone who knows about it can keep his or her trap shut, Otto especially, now that he's back on his medication. And Michelle."

"And what about Michelle—what this Michelbag did to her, I mean."

"A guilty plea to a charge of assault, I'd guess; a sentence of hospitalization. She's not vindictive."

"But why did he do it, R. J.? I still don't understand. He's a little crazy, yeah, but . . ."

"Well, I think it starts with your granddaughter being a naïve idealist."

"If you say so."

"This unstable, self-justifying, older man—sort of a con man, don't you see?—started in using her naïveté as a means of unloading his frustrations, and after a while she fell not only for his lies but for him too, and decided she was going to save him from the wicked ex-wife's 'creepy and immoral' clutches. That's how it began.

"Well, this wasn't the guy's intentions. He just liked having someone to pity and admire him, otherwise he wouldn't have sworn her to secrecy from the start about the whole deception thing. He'd dug himself in so deep over time that he either had to

go along with Michelle or else admit what a liar he was, and so, yeah sure, he told her, if you're that fed up with your life too, you can move into the extra room in the shop.

"Only Michelle wanted more, Nathan. She's sick about it now, and it sounds pretty silly, but she really had a plan to save the guy from further degradation, and she sort of forced him to go along through her own moral virtue. She still had a key to the antique shop, and the plan was for them to break in one night and haul off all the fakes he'd created that were still on the floor. They picked a Saturday night to do it after there was a new helper in the store because they knew that Saundra Wright ordinarily spent Sundays and sometimes Mondays in the hinterlands looking for fresh antiques. How they thought she wouldn't know right away that Michelberger was involved is a different question, since they were only taking his pieces, but logic never stopped a naïve idealist yet.

"Anyway, they broke in and hauled the stuff away in a rental truck, and when they got it back to the woodworking shop, Nathan, your granddaughter decided suddenly that removing it from Wright's Treasures wasn't enough. She was going to break the spell Otto Michelberger was under by dismantling the fakes board by board, until only the two clockworks were left intact."

"Oy vey. And so he went berserk."

"It was like telling Michelangelo you were about to take a bucket of latex to the Sistine Chapel. He beat her up in a fit and bound her and gagged her because he couldn't let her loose, but then he didn't know what to do. He'd told her too much, even if most of it was only half true, and of course he hadn't taken his pills since she'd moved in. The whole thing was a mess. When the phone rang that night he didn't answer because he suddenly knew that it had to be his ex-wife calling about the theft, and what was he going to say?"

"I don't think Michelle was ever in danger of her life, though," I interjected. "Saundra thinks not, too. But it's still terribly sad, everything about it. All three parties are victims."

"Well, yeah," R. J. agreed, having the last word in the affair, "but at least nobody's dead."

I helped out for two weeks more at Wright's Treasures, until a chastened Saundra Wright was able to find another "mature woman" to replace me, and on the day of my leaving she hugged me outside the back door before saying, "I have a surprise for you, Ginny. I'm following you home."

She led me to her van and opened the rear doors, then threw back a canvas to reveal the Morbier clock in a box on the floor,

and Otto Michelberger's artfully rustic clock case stretched alongside it. "A remembrance," she said, "which you're not allowed to refuse. You'll need my help to put it together."

Over time Michelle Stone recovered physically and became measurably wiser and more reconciled to her family. Later she joined the Peace Corps and, later still, married.

Her grandfather danced at her wedding and died shortly after.

Otto Michelberger, in contrast, worsened over the years and was permanently institutionalized in 1995.

The Carrs, of course, grew older.

Saundra and I remained friends.

Le triumph de verité et temps. ♪

Solution to the November "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

- A. Retains
- B. Opined
- C. Behemoth
- D. Enhanced
- E. Remiss
- F. Timpani
- G. Brashness
- H. Lugubrious

- I. Ownership
- J. Cities
- K. Hexes
- L. Ashen
- M. Luxury
- N. Fuddy-duddy
- O. Rastafarian
- P. Effective
- Q. Detente

- R. Handmade
- S. Impassive
- T. Thinner
- U. Connects
- V. Hawthorne
- W. Coquettes
- X. Off the cuff
- Y. Crossword
- Z. Kowtowed

QUOTATION

Author—ROBERT BLOCH

Work—“(THE RETURN OF) ALFRED HITCHCOCK”

(AHMM, November 1985)

“Hitchcock . . . was seldom present . . . in the . . . office, but there was never any doubt of his . . . influence. . . . Consider . . . what he achieved—two hundred and sixty-six episodes. . . . The drama and suspense came from the wry humor, offbeat situations, and frequent surprise endings.”

MYSTERY CLASSIC

J. S. LEFANU

LAURA SILVER BELL

In the five Northumbrian counties you will scarcely find so bleak, ugly, and yet, in a savage way, so picturesque a moor as Dardale Moss. The moor itself spreads north, south, east, and west, a great undulating sea of black peat and heath.

What we may term its shores are wooded wildly with birch, hazel, and dwarf-oak. No towering mountains surround it, but here and there you have a rocky knoll rising among the trees, and many a wooded promontory of the same pretty, because utterly wild, forest, running out into its dark level.

Habitations are thinly scattered in this barren territory, and a full mile away from the meanest was the stone cottage of Mother Carke.

Let not my southern reader who associates ideas of comfort with the term "cottage" mistake. This thing is built of shingle, with low walls. Its thatch is hollow; the peat-smoke curls stingily from its stunted chimney. It is worthy of its savage surroundings.

The primitive neighbours remark that no rowan-tree grows near, nor holly, nor bracken, and no horseshoe is nailed on the door.

Not far from the birches and hazels that straggle about the rude wall of the little enclosure, on the contrary, they say, you may discover the broom and the rag-wort, in which witches mysteriously delight. But this is perhaps a scandal.

Mall Carke was for many a year the *sage femme* of this wild domain. She has renounced practice, however, for some years; and now, under the rose, she dabbles, it is thought, in the black art; in which she has always been secretly skilled, tells fortunes, practises charms, and in popular esteem is little better than a witch.

Mother Carke has been away to the town of Willarden, to sell knit

stockings, and is returning to her rude dwelling by Dardale Moss. To her right, as far away as the eye can reach, the moor stretches. The narrow track she has followed here tops a gentle upland, and at her left a sort of jungle of dwarf-oak and brushwood approaches its edge. The sun is sinking blood-red in the west. His disk has touched the broad black level of the moor, and his parting beams glare athwart the gaunt figure of the old beldame, as she strides homeward stick in hand, and bring into relief the folds of her mantle, which gleam like the draperies of a bronze image in the light of a fire. For a few moments this light floods the air—tree, gorse, rock, and bracken glare; and then it is out, and gray twilight over everything.

All is still and sombre. At this hour the simple traffic of the thinly-peopled country is over, and nothing can be more solitary.

From this jungle, nevertheless, through which the mists of evening are already creeping, she sees a gigantic man approaching her.

In that poor and primitive country robbery is a crime unknown. She, therefore, has no fears for her pound of tea, and pint of gin, and sixteen shillings in silver which she is bringing home in her pocket. But there is something that would have frightened another woman about this man.

He is gaunt, sombre, bony, dirty, and dressed in a black suit which a beggar would hardly care to pick out of the dust.

This ill-looking man nodded to her as he stepped on the road.

"I don't know you," she said.

He nodded again.

"I never sid ye neyawheere," she exclaimed sternly.

"Fine evening, Mother Carke," he says, and holds his snuff-box toward her.

She widened the distance between them by a step or so, and said again sternly and pale,

"I hev nowt to say to thee, whoe'er thou beest."

"You know Laura Silver Bell?"

"That's a byneyam; the lass's neyam is Laura Lew," she answered, looking straight before her.

"One name's as good as another for one that was never christened, mother."

"How know ye that?" she asked grimly; for it is a received opinion in that part of the world that the fairies have power over those who have never been baptised.

The stranger turned on her a malignant smile.

"There is a young lord in love with her," the stranger says, "and I'm that lord. Have her at your house tomorrow night at eight o'clock, and you must stick cross pins through the candle, as you

have done for many a one before, to bring her lover thither by ten, and her fortune's made. And take this for your trouble."

He extended his long finger and thumb toward her, with a guinea temptingly displayed.

"I have nowt to do wi' thee. I nivver sid thee afoore. Git thee awa'! I earned nea goold o' thee, and I'll tak' nane. Awa' wi' thee, or I'll find ane that will mak' thee!"

The old woman had stopped, and was quivering in every limb as she thus spoke.

He looked very angry. Sulkily he turned away at her words, and strode slowly toward the wood from which he had come; and as he approached it, he seemed to her to grow taller and taller, and stalked into it as high as a tree.

"I conceited there would come something o't", she said to herself. "Farmer Lew must git it done nesht Sunda'. The a'ad awpy!"

Old Farmer Lew was one of that sect who insist that baptism shall be but once administered, and not until the Christian candidate had attained to adult years. The girl had indeed for some time been of an age not only, according to this theory, to be baptised, but if need be to be married.

Her story was a sad little romance. A lady some seventeen years before had come down and paid Farmer Lew for two rooms in his house. She told him that her husband would follow her in a fortnight, and that he was in the mean time delayed by business in Liverpool.

In ten days after her arrival her baby was born, Mall Carke acting as *sage femme* on the occasion; and on the evening of that day the poor young mother died. No husband came; no wedding-ring, they said, was on her finger. About fifty pounds was found in her desk, which Farmer Lew, who was a kind old fellow and had lost his two children, put in bank for the little girl, and resolved to keep her until a rightful owner should step forward to claim her.

They found half-a-dozen love-letters signed "Francis," and calling the dead woman "Laura."

So Farmer Lew called the little girl Laura; and her *sobriquet* of "Silver Bell" was derived from a tiny silver bell, once gilt, which was found among her poor mother's little treasures after her death, and which the child wore on a ribbon round her neck.

Thus, being very pretty and merry, she grew up as a North-country farmer's daughter; and the old man, as she needed more looking after, grew older and less able to take care of her; so she was, in fact, very nearly her own mistress, and did pretty much in all things as she liked.

Old Mall Carke, by some caprice for which no one could account, cherished an affection for the girl, who saw her often, and paid her many a small fee in exchange for the secret indications of the future.

It was too late when Mother Carke reached her home to look for a visit from Laura Silver Bell that day.

About three o'clock next afternoon, Mother Carke was sitting knitting, with her glasses on, outside her door on the stone bench, when she saw the pretty girl mount lightly to the top of the stile at her left under the birch, against the silver stem of which she leaned her slender hand, and called,

"Mall, Mall! Mother Carke, are ye alane all by yersel'?"

"Ay, Laura lass, we can be clooas enoo, if ye want a word wi' me," says the old woman, rising, with a mysterious nod, and beckoning her stiffly with her long fingers.

The girl was, assuredly, pretty enough for a "lord" to fall in love with. Only look at her. A profusion of brown rippling hair, parted low in the middle of her forehead, almost touched her eyebrows, and made the pretty oval of her face, by the breadth of that rich line, more marked. What a pretty little nose! what scarlet lips, and large, dark, long-fringed eyes!

Her face is transparently tinged with those clear Murillo tints which appear in deeper dyes on her wrists and the backs of her hands. These are the beautiful gipsy-tints with which the sun dyes young skins so richly.

The old woman eyes all this, and her pretty figure, so round and slender, and her shapely little feet, cased in the thick shoes that can't hide their comely proportions, as she stands on the top of the stile. But it is with a dark and saturnine aspect.

"Come, lass, what stand ye for atoppa t' wall, whar folk may chance to see thee? I hev a thing to tell thee, lass."

She beckoned her again.

"An' I hev a thing to tell *thee*, Mall."

"Come hidder," said the old woman peremptorily.

"But ye munna gie me the creepin's" (make me tremble). "I winna look again into the glass o' water, mind ye."

The old woman smiled grimly, and changed her tone.

"Now, hunny, git tha down, and let ma see thy canny feyace," and she beckoned her again.

Laura Silver Bell did get down, and stepped lightly toward the door of the old woman's dwelling.

"Tak this," said the girl, unfolding a piece of bacon from her apron, "and I hev a silver sixpence to gie thee, when I'm gaen away heyam."

They entered the dark kitchen of the cottage, and the old woman stood by the door, lest their conference should be lighted on by surprise.

"Afoore ye begin," said Mother Carke (I soften her patois), "I mun tell ye there's ill folk watchin' ye. What's auld Farmer Lew about, he doesna get t' sir" (the clergyman) "to baptise thee? If he lets Sunda' next pass, I'm afeared ye'll never be sprinkled nor signed wi' cross, while there's a sky aboon us."

"Agoy!" exclaims the girl, "who's lookin' after me?"

"A big black fella, as high as the kipples, came out o' the wood near Deadman's Grike, just after the sun gaed down yester e'en; I knew weel what he was, for his feet ne'er touched the road while he made as if he walked beside me. And he wanted to gie me snuff first, and I wouldna hev that; and then he offered me a gowden guinea, but I was no sic awpy, and to bring you here tonight, and cross the candle wi' pins, to call your lover in. And he said he's a great lord, and in luve wi' thee."

"And you refused him?"

"Well for thee I did, lass," says Mother Carke.

"Why, it's every word true!" cries the girl vehemently, starting to her feet, for she had seated herself on the great oak chest.

"True, lass? Come, say what ye mean," demanded Mall Carke, with a dark and searching gaze.

"Last night I was coming heyam from the wake, w' auld farmer Dykes and his wife and his daughter Nell, and when we came to the stile, I bid them good-night, and we parted."

"And ye came by the path alone in the night-time, did ye?" exclaimed old Mall Carke sternly.

"I wasna afeared, I don't know why; the path heyam leads down by the wa's o' auld Hawarth Castle."

"I knaa it weel, and a dowly path it is; ye'll keep indoors o' nights for a while, or ye'll rue it. What saw ye?"

"No freetin, mother; nowt I was feared on."

"Ye heard a voice callin' yer neyame?"

"I heard nowt that was dow, but the hullyhoo in the auld castle wa's," answered the pretty girl. "I heard nor sid nowt that's dow, but mickle that's conny and gladsome. I heard singin' and laughin' a long way off, I consaited; and I stopped a bit to listen. Then I walked on a step or two, and there, sure enough in the Pie-Mag field, under the castle wa's, not twenty steps away, I sid a grand company; silks and satins, and men wi' velvet coats, wi' gowd-lace striped over them, and ladies wi' necklaces that would dazzle ye, and fans as big as griddles; and powdered footmen, like

what the shirra hed behind his coach, only these was ten times as grand."

"It was full moon last night," said the old woman.

"Sa bright 'twould blind ye to look at it," said the girl.

"Never an ill sight but the deaul finds a light," quoth the old woman. "There's a rinnin brook thar—you were at this side, and they at that; did they try to mak ye cross over?"

"Agoy! didn't they? Nowt but civility and kindness, though. But ye mun let me tell it my own way. They was talkin' and laughin', and eatin', and drinkin' out o' long glasses and goud cups, seated on the grass, and music was playin'; and I keekin' behind a bush at all the grand doin's; and up they gits to dance; and says a tall fella I didna see afoore, 'Ye mun step across, and dance wi' a young lord that's faan in luv wi' thee, and that's mysel', and sure enow I keeked at him under my lashes and a conny lad he is, to my teyaste, though he be dressed in black, wi' sword and sash, velvet twice as fine as they sells in the shop at Gouden Friars; and keekin' at me again fra the corners o' his een. And the same fella telt me he was mad in luv wi' me, and his fadder was there, and his sister, and they came all the way from Catstean Castle to see me that night; and that's t' other side o' Gouden Friars."

"Come, lass, yer no mafflin; tell me true. What was he like? Was his feyace grimed wi' sut? a tall fella wi' wide shouthers, and lukt like an ill-thing, wi' black clothes amaist in rags?"

"His feyace was long, but weel-faured, and darker nor a gipsy; and his clothes were black and grand, and made o' velvet, and he said he was the young lord himsel'; and he lukt like it."

"That will be the same fella I sid at Deadman's Grike," said Mall Carke, with an anxious frown.

"Hoot, mudder! how cud that be?" cried the lass, with a toss of her pretty head and a smile of scorn. But the fortune-teller made no answer, and the girl went on with her story.

"When they began to dance," continued Laura Silver Bell, "he urged me again, but I wudna step o'er; 'twas partly pride, coz I wasna dressed fine enough, and partly contrairiness, or something, but gaa I wudna, not a fut. No but I more nor half wished it a' the time."

"Weel for thee thou dudstna cross the brook."

"Hoity-toity, why not?"

"Keep at heyame after nightfall, and don't ye be walking by yersel' by daylight or any light lang lonesome ways, till after ye're baptised," said Mall Carke.

"I'm like to be married first."

"Take care *that* marriage won't hang i' the bell-ropes," said Mother Carke.

"Leave me alane for that. The young lord said he was maist daft wi' luv o' me. He wanted to gie me a conny ring wi' a beautiful stone in it. But, drat it, I was sic an awpy I wudna tak it, and he a young lord!"

"Lord, indeed! are ye daft or dreamin'? Those fine folk; what were they? I'll tell ye. Dobies and fairies; and if ye don't du as yer bid, they'll tak ye, and ye'll never git out o' their hands again while grass grows," said the old woman grimly.

"Od wite it!" replies the girl impatiently, "who's daft or dreamin' noo? I'd a bin dead wi' fear, if 'twas any such thing. It cudna be; all was sa luvesome, and bonny, and shaply."

"Weel, and what do ye want o' me, lass?" asked the old woman sharply.

"I want to know—here's t' sixpence—what I sud du," said the young lass. "'Twud be a pity to lose such a marrow, hey?"

"Say yer prayers, lass; I can't help ye," says the old woman darkly. "If ye gaa wi' *the* people, ye'll never come back. Ye munna talk wi' them, nor eat wi' them, nor drink wi' them, nor tak a pin's-worth by way o' gift fra them—mark weel what I say—or ye're *lost*!"

The girl looked down, plainly much vexed.

The old woman stared at her with a mysterious frown steadily, for a few seconds.

"Tell me, lass, and tell me true, are ye in luve wi' that lad?"

"What for sud I?" said the girl with a careless toss of her head, and blushing up to her very temples.

"I see how it is," said the old woman, with a groan, and repeated the words, sadly thinking; and walked out of the door a step or two, and looked jealously round. "The lass is witched, the lass is witched!"

"Did ye see him since?" asked Mother Carke, returning.

The girl was still embarrassed; and now she spoke in a lower tone, and seemed subdued.

"I thought I sid him as I came here, walkin' beside me among the trees; but I consait it was only the trees themsels that lukt like rinnin' one behind another, as I walked on."

"I can tell thee nowt, lass, but what I telt ye afoore," answered the old woman peremptorily. "Get ye hayame, and don't delay on the way; and say yer prayers as ye gaa; and let none but good thoughts come nigh ye; and put nayer foot outside the door-steyan again till ye gaa to be christened; and get that done a Sunda' next."

And with this charge, given with grizzly earnestness, she saw her

over the stile, and stood upon it watching her retreat, until the trees quite hid her and her path from view.

The sky grew cloudy and thunderous, and the air darkened rapidly, as the girl, a little frightened by Mall Carke's view of the case, walked homeward by the lonely path among the trees.

A black cat, which had walked close by her—for these creatures sometimes take a ramble in search of their prey among the woods and thickets—crept from under the hollow of an oak, and was again with her. It seemed to her to grow bigger and bigger as the darkness deepened, and its green eyes glared as large as halfpennies in her affrighted vision as the thunder came booming along the heights from the Willarden-road.

She tried to drive it away; but it growled and hissed awfully, and set up its back as if it would spring at her, and finally it skipped up into a tree, where they grew thickest at each side of her path, and accompanied her, high over head, hopping from bough to bough as if meditating a pounce upon her shoulders. Her fancy being full of strange thoughts, she was frightened, and she fancied that it was haunting her steps, and destined to undergo some hideous transformation, the moment she ceased to guard her path with prayers.

She was frightened for a while after she got home. The dark looks of Mother Carke were always before her eyes, and a secret dread prevented her passing the threshold of her home again that night.

Next day it was different. She had got rid of the awe with which Mother Carke had inspired her. She could not get the tall dark-featured lord, in the black velvet dress, out of her head. He had "taken her fancy"; she was growing to love him. She could think of nothing else.

Bessie Hennock, a neighbour's daughter, came to see her that day, and proposed a walk toward the ruins of Hawarth Castle, to gather "blaeberries." So off the two girls went together.

In the thicket, along the slopes near the ivied walls of Hawarth Castle, the companions began to fill their baskets. Hours passed. The sun was sinking near the west, and Laura Silver Bell had not come home.

Over the hatch of the farm-house door the maids leant ever and anon with outstretched necks, watching for a sign of the girl's return, and wondering, as the shadows lengthened, what had become of her.

At last, just as the rosy sunset gilding began to overspread the landscape, Bessie Hennock, weeping into her apron, made her appearance without her companion.

Her account of their adventures was curious.

I will relate the substance of it more connectedly than her agitation would allow her to give it, and without the disguise of the rude Northumbrian dialect.

The girl said that, as they got along together among the brambles that grow beside the brook that bounds the Pie-Mag field, she on a sudden saw a very tall big-boned man, with an ill-favoured smirched face, and dressed in worn and rusty black, standing at the other side of a little stream. She was frightened; and while looking at this dirty, wicked, starved figure, Laura Silver Bell touched her, gazing at the same tall scarecrow, but with a countenance full of confusion and even rapture. She was peeping through the bush behind which she stood, and with a sigh she said:

"Is na that a conny lad? Agoy! See his bonny velvet clothes, his sword and sash; that's a lord, I can tell ye; and weel I know who he follows, who he luves, and who he'll wed."

Bessie Hennock thought her companion daft.

"See how luvesome he luks!" whispered Laura.

Bessie looked again, and saw him gazing at her companion with a malignant smile, and at the same time he beckoned her to approach.

"Darrat ta! gaa not near him! he'll wring thy neck!" gasped Bessie in great fear, as she saw Laura step forward with a look of beautiful bashfulness and joy.

She took the hand he stretched across the stream, more for love of the hand than any need of help, and in a moment was across and by his side, and his long arm about her waist.

"Fares te weel, Bessie, I'm gain my ways," she called, leaning her head to his shoulder; "and tell gud Fadder Lew I'm gain my ways to be happy, and may be, at lang last, I'll see him again."

And with a farewell wave of her hand, she went away with her dismal partner; and Laura Silver Bell was never more seen at home, or among the "coppies" and "wickwoods," the bonny fields and bosky hollows, by Dardale Moss.

Bessie Hennock followed them for a time.

She crossed the brook, and though they seemed to move slowly enough, she was obliged to run to keep them in view; and she all the time cried to her continually, "Come back, come back, bonnie Laurie!" until, getting over a bank, she was met by a white-faced old man, and so frightened was she, that she thought she fainted outright. At all events, she did not come to herself until the birds were singing their vespers in the amber light of sunset, and the day was over.

No trace of the direction of the girl's flight was ever discovered. Weeks and months passed, and more than a year.

At the end of that time, one of Mall Carke's goats died, as she suspected, by the envious practices of a rival witch who lived at the far end of Dardale Moss.

All alone in her stone cabin the old woman had prepared her charm to ascertain the author of her misfortune.

The heart of the dead animal, stuck all over with pins, was burnt in the fire; the windows, doors, and every other aperture of the house being first carefully stopped. After the heart, thus prepared with suitable incantations, is consumed in the fire, the first person who comes to the door or passes by it is the offending magician.

Mother Carke completed these lonely rites at dead of night. It was a dark night, with the glimmer of the stars only, and a melancholy night-wind was sighing through the scattered woods that spread around.

After a long and dead silence, there came a heavy thump at the door, and a deep voice called her by name.

She was startled, for she expected no man's voice; and peeping from the window, she saw, in the dim light, a coach and four horses, with gold-laced footmen, and coachman in wig and cocked hat, turned out as if for a state occasion.

She unbarred the door; and a tall gentleman, dressed in black, waiting at the threshold, entreated her, as the only *sage femme* within reach, to come in the coach and attend Lady Lairdale, who was about to give birth to a baby, promising her handsome payment.

Lady Lairdale! She had never heard of her.

"How far away is it?"

"Twelve miles on the old road to Golden Friars."

Her avarice is roused, and she steps into the coach. The footman claps to the door; the glass jingles with the sound of a laugh. The tall dark-faced gentleman in black is seated opposite; they are driving at a furious pace; they have turned out of the road into a narrower one, dark with thicker and loftier forest than she was accustomed to. She grows anxious; for she knows every road and by-path in the country round, and she has never seen this one.

He encourages her. The moon has risen above the edge of the horizon, and she sees a noble old castle. Its summit of tower, watch-tower and battlement, glimmers faintly in the moonlight. This is their destination.

She feels on a sudden all but overpowered by sleep; but

although she nods, she is quite conscious of the continued motion, which has become even rougher.

She makes an effort, and rouses herself. What has become of the coach, the castle, the servants? Nothing but the strange forest remains the same.

She is jolting along in a rude hurdle, seated on rushes, and a tall, big-boned man, in rags, sits in front, kicking with his heel the ill-favoured beast that pulls them along, every bone of which sticks out, and holding the halter which serves for reins. They stop at the door of a miserable building of loose stone, with a thatch so sunk and rotten, that the roof-tree and couples protrude in crooked corners, like the bones of the wretched horse, with enormous head and ears, that dragged them to the door.

The long gaunt man gets down, his sinister face grimed like his hands.

It was the same grimy giant who had accosted her on the lonely road near Deadman's Grike. But she feels that she, "must go through with it" now, and she follows him into the house.

Two rushlights were burning in the large and miserable room, and on a coarse ragged bed lay a woman groaning piteously.

"That's Lady Lairdale," says the gaunt dark man, who then began to stride up and down the room rolling his head, stamping furiously, and thumping one hand on the palm of the other, and talking and laughing in the corners, where there was no one visible to hear or to answer.

Old Mall Carke recognized in the faded half-starved creature who lay on the bed, as dark now and grimy as the man, and looking as if she had never in her life washed hands or face, the once blithe and pretty Laura Lew.

The hideous being who was her mate continued in the same odd fluctuations of fury, grief, and merriment; and whenever she uttered a groan, he parodied it with another, as Mother Carke thought, in saturnine derision.

At length he strode into another room, and banged the door after him.

In due time the poor woman's pains were over, and a daughter was born.

Such an imp! with long pointed ears, flat nose, and enormous restless eyes and mouth. It instantly began to yell and talk in some unknown language, at the noise of which the father looked into the room, and told the *sage femme* that she should not go unrewarded.

The sick woman seized the moment of his absence to say in the ear of Mall Clarke:

"If ye had not been at ill work tonight, he could not hev fetched ye. Tak no more now than your rightful fee, or he'll keep ye here."

At this moment he returned with a bag of gold and silver coins, which he emptied on the table, and told her to help herself.

She took four shillings, which was her primitive fee, neither more nor less; and all his urgency could not prevail with her to take a farthing more. He looked so terrible at her refusal, that she rushed out of the house.

He ran after her.

"You'll take your money with you," he roared, snatching up the bag, still half full, and flung it after her.

It lighted on her shoulder; and partly from the blow, partly from terror, she fell to the ground; and when she came to herself, it was morning, and she was lying across her own door-stone.

It is said that she never more told fortune or practised spell. And though all that happened sixty years ago and more, Laura Silver Bell, wise folk think, is still living, and will so continue till the day of doom among the fairies. ♫

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
rashedcivwxyzbfjgklmnopqtn

From "Ah, Rash Deceiver" AHMM, December 2003

—John H. Dirckx

I may as well tell you, before somebody else does, that we hated each other. But I didn't strangle her in my own back hall.

THE STORY THAT WON

The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Rebecca Pawel of New York, New York. Honorable mentions go to Mike Reczek of Taichung, Taiwan; Rudy Uribe, Jr., of Valley Glen, California; Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Bryan Dusini of Brooklyn, New York; H. C. Finch of Zion, Illinois; Robert J. Cloud of Bellingham, Washington; Jim Sadlemyer of Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada; Pamela Karavolos of Rosamond, California; and Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida.



© Jana Leon/Graphistock

BLEEDING BLACK

REBECCA PAWEL

It's not really a crime, he thought, pen hovering over the box marked "inspector's signature."

Picture a city built on a peninsula shaped like an hourglass. The top of the hourglass houses the old town, with a park looking over the sea. Brightly painted houses line the steep cobbled streets, where music floats on the salt-scented air.

It shouldn't even be illegal. These regulations are just some tree-huggers' paranoia. The company says it's okay and they know what they're doing.

Picture a city proud and fair as its people, its modern downtown sandwiched in the thin part of the hourglass. One side faces onto a bustling port, where merchants and fishermen anchor. The other curves along a stone promenade above a sandy beach, where children play in the azure waves.

It won't hurt anyone. These old ships were built to last. The single-hull tankers'll be around long after these fancy double- and triple-hull boats're gone.

Picture a city governed by honest and intelligent elected officials who use the prosperity brought by the sea to build housing, parks, senior centers, and schools.

It's not really a crime. Just a Christmas bonus and a favor to a friend. He signed. The pen leaked and bled black ink across his palms.

Picture a stormy night when a struggling tanker split and bled black oil that covered the beach where the children played and the harbor where the fishermen anchored.

It's not really a crime, he thought, as he washed his hands.

Author's note: This story was inspired not only by the photo "Ghost Ship" but also by the city of Gijón, which was affected by the sinking of the oil tanker Prestige, like all the similarly beautiful cities along the coast of Northern Spain.

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INDEX

VOLUME FORTY-NINE



2004

- Alderman, Mitch**
Burnt Wood . . . Jul/Aug 196
- Alexander, Gary**
Jane and Dick . . . Mar 118
The Return of the Disappeared
 . . . Nov. 72
Soft and Approachable . . . May 70
- Allyn, Doug**
Secondhand Heart . . . Jan/Feb 50
- Anderson, Frederick Irving**
The Phantom Alibi . . . Jun 127
- Auswaks, Alex**
Russell Davenport and the Countess
 . . . Apr 66
Russell Davenport and the Housekeeper
 . . . Jan/Feb 160
- Bell, Naomi** Night Highway . . . Sep 4
- Biggle, Jr., Lloyd**
The Case of the Chinese Santa Claus
 . . . Jan/Feb 24
- Black, Michael A.** Inquest . . . Mar 4
- Black, Terry** The Gun . . . Sep 126
- Bowen, Rhys** Voodoo . . . Nov 35
- Braly, David**
The Open Till . . . Dec 96
A Trail on the Desert . . . Jun 19
- Brown, Ernest B. and Alice A.**
Divorce Work . . . Jul/Aug 170
- Brown, J. Edward**
The Figurehead Murder . . . Nov 67
- Davis, Susan Page**
Mailbox Mayhem . . . Sep 102
- DeJesus, Edmund X.**
Home Defense System . . . Oct 35
- De Noux, O'Neil**
Don't Make Me Take Off My Sunglasses
 . . . Apr 33
The Gorilla Murders . . . Jul/Aug 130
- Deverell, Diana**
Hazmat Heel-and-Toe . . . Jun 4
- Dirckx, John H.**
Body English . . . Oct 44
Profit without Honor . . . Jul/Aug 36
- Dobbyn, John F.**
Trumpeter Swan . . . Jan/Feb. 192
- Druett, Joan**
Brethren of the Sea . . . Nov 20
- DuBois, Brendan**
Death of a Gemini . . . Sep 80
- Emerson, Kathy Lynn**
The Curse of the Figure Flinger
 . . . Dec 76
- Fallis, Gregory S.**
Dog on Fire . . . May 46
- Fenn, Jaine**
Paying for Rain . . . Jul/Aug. 20
- Franklin, S. L.**
The Triumph of Truth and Time
 . . . Dec 102
- Futrelle, Jacques**
The Problem of the Deserted House
 . . . Nov 126
- Gates, David Edgerley**
Winter Kill . . . Mar 56
- Gordon, Alan**
The Jester and the Thieves . . . Oct 72
- Grace, David** Piecework . . . Nov 54
- Graham, Bruce**
The Charge Not Filed . . . Jan/Feb 228
- Gray, Robert**
A Confession of Innocence
 . . . Jul/Aug 114
Kapitan's Late Shift . . . Oct 86
- Gray, Sherrard**
Junk and Disorderly . . . May 86
- Henry, O.**
Conscience in Art . . . Apr 134
- Hoch, Edward D.**
Bar Sinister . . . Apr 122

- Hockensmith, Steve**
 The Case of the Unfortunate Fortune
 Cookie . . . Oct 124
 Tricks . . . Jul/Aug 74
- Hughes, Matt** Muscle . . . Sep 50
- Ingraham, Jim**
 Prisoner of Guilt . . . Jun 108
- Johnson, Douglas Grant**
 That Thing . . . Dec 32
- Keifetz, Norman**
 Twin Killing . . . Jul/Aug 5
- Kersh, Gerald**
 Inscrutable Providence . . . Oct 135
- Law, Janice**
 The Girl Watcher . . . Jan/Feb 85
- Lawton, R. T.** In Bond . . . Nov 98
 The Other Bondsman . . . Jul/Aug 220
- LeFanu, J. S.**
 Laura Silver Bell . . . Dec 127
- Levinson, Robert S.**
 Absolutely Live in Person
 . . . Jan/Feb 126
 The Eleven O'Clock Number
 . . . Dec 63
 The Hit . . . Jul/Aug 62
- Limón, Martin**
 The Cold Yellow Sea . . . Jan/Feb 6
- Lopresti, Robert**
 A Bad Day for Pink and Yellow Shirts
 . . . May 34
- Ludwigsen, Will** Bingo . . . May 108
- Mackay, Scott**
 Numbers . . . Jul/Aug 155
- Mackey, Sharon J.**
 Dress for Snow . . . Oct 4
- Mambretti, Catherine**
 The Mute Monja, or The Walls
 Could Talk . . . Apr 44
- McLean, Russel D.**
 The Death of Ronnie Sweets . . . Jun 72
 Dudman's Word . . . Dec 15
- Menge, Elaine**
 A Period of Adjustment . . . Apr 78
- Morrison, Arthur**
 The Stolen Blenkinsop . . . Mar 129
- Myers, Beverle Graves**
 The Franklin Fiasco . . . Sep 32
- Parker, Percy Spurlark**
 Gift Horse . . . Nov 110
 Uncle Harold . . . Jul/Aug 216
- Payne, Will**
 The Detectives . . . Sep 134
- Petrin, Jas. R.**
 The House on Back Street . . . May 6
- Reddall, D. H.**
 Dark Matter . . . Nov 6
 Fall Guy . . . Jan/Feb 183
- Richmond, Brian**
 The Good Kid . . . May 124
- Ritchie, Steve**
 Dig the Hole First . . . Mar 48
- Rowan, Iain** Fake . . . Jan/Feb 117
- Rule, Rebecca** Thief . . . Jun 38
- Rusch, Kristine Kathryn**
 Thorns . . . Jan/Feb 96
- Schofield, Neil A.**
 Cupboard Love . . . Jun 88
 Settling Mr. Erdy . . . Mar 88
- Sproul, Dan A.** Hunch . . . Mar 102
- Strong, Marianne Wilski**
 Death at the Festival . . . Mar 22
- Vernon, Gigi**
 The Maidservant's Letter . . . Jan/Feb 214
- Weston, Anne**
 By the Monkey-Ladder Vine . . . Apr 4
- Wilson, Jr., L. A.**
 Bleeding Hearts . . . Oct 102
 Heart of the Matter . . . Apr 104
 The Road to Memphis . . . Jan/Feb 144
- Wishnia, K. j. a.**
 All That Glitters . . . Jun 48
- Woodward, Ann**
 The Burden of Pity . . . Dec 4
- Zangwill, Israel**
 Cheating the Gallows . . . May 130

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK

Linda Landrigan
EDITOR

Jonas Eno-Van Fleet
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Susan Kendrioski
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
ART AND PRODUCTION

Victoria Green
SENIOR ART DIRECTOR

June Levine
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Carole Dixon
SENIOR PRODUCTION MANAGER

Abigail Browning
MANAGER, SUBSIDIARY RIGHTS
AND MARKETING

Bruce W. Sherbow
VICE PRESIDENT,
SALES AND MARKETING

Sandy Marlowe
CIRCULATION SERVICES

Julia McEvoy
MANAGER, ADVERTISING SALES

Connie Goon
ADVERTISING SALES COORDINATOR

Peter Kanter
PUBLISHER

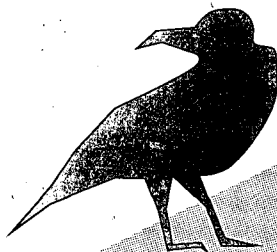
www.TheMysteryPlace.com

COMING IN
JANUARY/FEBRUARY
2004

Two Birds with
One Stone
Jeremiah Healy

A Crust of Rice
Martin Limón

Death at the
Theatre
Marianne Wilski Strong



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DIRECTORY OF SERVICES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Editorial Offices

475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

Subscription Services

(800) 220-7443
www.themysteryplace.com

Change of Address & Subscription Inquiries

www.themysteryplace.com
Or send your current mailing label
and new address to:

AHMM
6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220
Address problems to
Sandy Marlowe at
smarlowe@pennypublicatons.com

Back Issues

Send check for \$5.00 per issue
(*\$7.00 per issue outside the U.S.*) to:
AHMM
6 Prowitt Street, Suite 100
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220
*Please specify which issue
you are ordering.*

Subrights & Permissions

licensing@pennypublications.com
Or fax inquiries to (212) 686-7414

Newsstand Sales

Dell Magazines, Department NS
6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220
(203) 866-6688
newsstand@pennypublications.com

Advertising Representative

Connie Goon, Advertising Sales Coordinator
475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016
Tel: (212) 686-7188 ■ Fax: (212) 686-7414
adsales@dellmagazines.com
classifiedads@dellmagazines.com
(Display & Classified Advertising)

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 49, No. 12, December, 2004. Published monthly except for combined January/February and July/August double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$43.90 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$53.90 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-220-7443. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 40012460. © 2004 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Dell is a trademark registered in the U.S. Patent Office. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub. Dept., 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. GST #R123054108.

Printed in Canada

143
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Alfred Hitchcock December '04

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Alfred Hitchcock/Ellery Queen combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: \$4.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414; or email: classifiedads@dellmagazines.com

AUDIO/VIDEO

Rent Audiobooks for Less! 400+ Mystery Titles. Compare and save. www.audiomysteries.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG. Used paper and hardcover mysteries. Books West, POB 417760, Sacramento, CA 95841-7760. Visa/MC/Amex/Discover.

TRAVEL/TOURS



MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE. 17th annual MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, May 21, 2005. Seven day Canada/New England cruise aboard Holland America Line's ms Maasdam. Guest writer, Stuart Kaminsky. Call CruiseWorks 1-800-876-6664

FREE AD OFFER

FOR OUR MYSTERY COMBO

**PLACE A CLASSIFIED AD IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES
AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!**

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 200,000 readers in our outstanding publications—**Ellery Queen** and **Alfred Hitchcock** mystery magazines.

 Call today for a new rate card. 

DELL MAGAZINES CLASSIFIED DEPARTMENT
475 Park Avenue South, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016
Call: (212) 686-7188 • Fax: (212) 686-7414
Email: classifiedads@dellmagazines.com

4 MYSTERY MAGAZINES

just \$5.95!



When it comes to knock-'em-dead detection, nobody outdoes ***Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine***.

To introduce you to the award-winning fiction of ***Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine***, we'd like to send you a special value pack of four favorite issues for just \$5.95 plus shipping.

Special introductory offer.

To get your value pack, fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment today.

DELL MAGAZINES

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☒ **YES!** Please send me my **Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Value Pack**. I get 4 back issues for just \$5.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of \$_____ is enclosed. (EQPK04)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Offer expires 12/31/05.

84C-NHQVL2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TheMysteryPlace.com



Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the leading short-fiction mystery magazines.

Log on and you'll enjoy:

- Full stories on-line
- Trivia contests
- Readers' Forum
- Award lists
- Book reviews
- Mystery puzzles

All this and much more!

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE
HITCHCOCK

ELLERY QUEEN
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com